

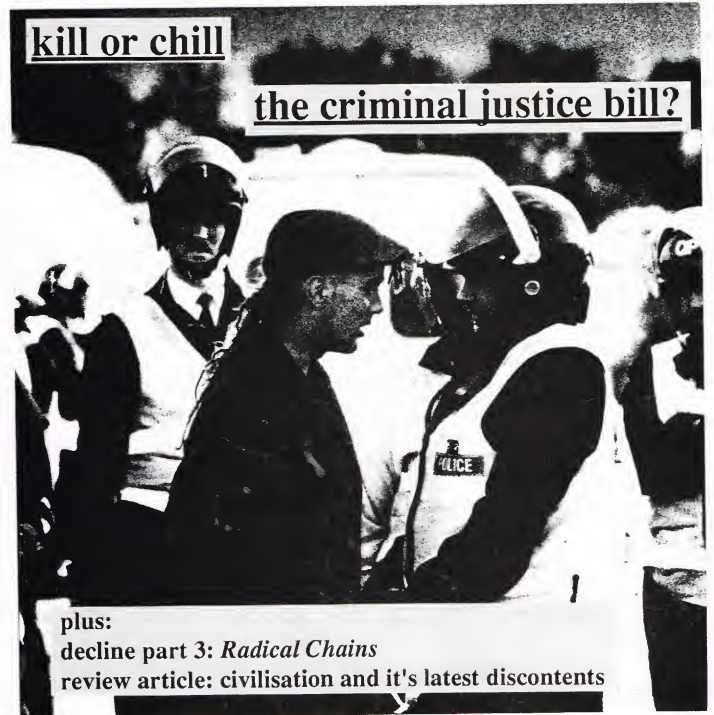
summer 1995

no. 4

# Aufheben

kill or chill

the criminal justice bill?



plus:

decline part 3: *Radical Chains*

review article: civilisation and it's latest discontents

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revolutionary perspectives



## Contents:

### Kill or Chlll? Analysis of the Opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill

*Last year, the threat of the Criminal Justice Bill galvanized thousands of people to take various forms of action against the state. It also brought very different oppositional elements together in a common practical relationship, many for the first time. In this issue, we examine the possibilities of these struggles.*

#### 1. Sign of the Times: Monetarism, the Crisis of Representation, and the CJB

*The struggles around the 1994 Criminal Justice Act are notable for their relative independence from the Labour Party and the left. The same national and global economic conditions that have enabled certain oppositional lifestyles to flourish have deprived the traditional forms of mediation and recuperation of their bargaining power.*

#### 2. From Campaign to Movement: Latent and Manifest Contradictions

*As the opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill began to organize itself, latent internal contradictions became increasingly apparent. Contradictions have been revealed not just between the subjects attempting to enact their antagonism to the state and those attempting to represent them; there have also been massive contradictions within both 'fluffy' and militant-liberal individuals, in terms of both their words and their actions. The national demonstrations have expressed both the highest points of the struggle (the Hyde Park riot) and the serious limitations of the perspective of some of those involved.*

#### 3. Into the Void: From Single-Issue Campaign to Anti-Capitalist Movement?

*Despite the language of 'rights' that has so far predominated, the movement which has emerged in opposition to the CJB contains within it tendencies which posit the dissolution of this alienated world of rights; their experiences in organizing against the CJB and the new law itself have often contributed to the development of such tendencies. The road protesters' refusal of democracy, the squatters' refusal of property rights, and the ravers' pursuit of autonomy: all these suggest the possibility of these particular campaigns going beyond themselves into general anti-capitalist struggle.*

### Decadence: The Theory of Decline or The Decline of Theory. Part III

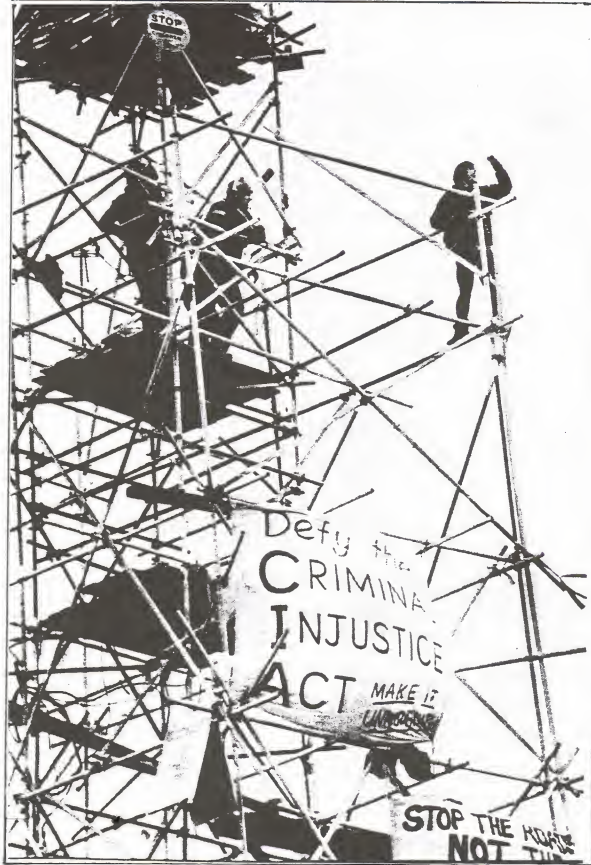
*In this, the long-awaited concluding part to our odyssey through the of history of theories of capitalist decline, we interrogate the account offered by the **Radical Chains** group. Despite their attempts to go beyond a classical Marxist theory of decline by supplementing it with autonomism, they still end up with an objectivist theory. All attempts to periodize capitalism into objective progressive and decadent phases seek capital's doom not in proletarian self-activity but in the forms of capitalist socialization. Such theories are therefore themselves doomed to fail the struggle of the proletariat.*

### Review Article: Civilization and its Latest Discontents.

*Fredy Perlman's influential book **Against His-story, Against Leviathan!** expresses the position of the new 'primitivist' current in which the enemy is not capital but progress. Going beyond leftist notions of the basic neutrality of technology is a step in the right direction; but seeing all technology as essentially alienating is a mystification. Since it is itself an expression in theory of a radical setback, primitivism contributes little to the practical problem we all face of overthrowing capitalism.*

# Kill or Chill?

Analysis of the Opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill



## Part One: Sign of the Times

### Monetarism, the Crisis of Representation, and the CJB

Any analysis of the opposition to what is now on the statute books as the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act has of course to consider what the legislation is all about, to examine its meaning as a weapon in the struggle between the contending classes. Such a consideration is far from easy given the wide ranging nature of the inordinate number of clauses contained in the act, varying from removing the Prison Officers' Association's right to strike to allowing the incarceration of children in prisons. A common criticism of the opposition to the act is that it has concentrated its concerns on Part 5, containing the provisions against ravers, travellers, squatters, hunt saboteurs and the like, and thereby giving the impression that the CJ&POA is concerned only with 'marginal elements'. Some anarchists (such as the Anarchist Black Cross) have argued that the supposedly 'anti-terrorist' measures, such as the reintroduction of stop and search powers, and the removal of the 'right of silence' under police questioning demonstrate that the act is not primarily concerned with marginals but conversely represents an attack on the working class as a whole. And many Leninists have argued that the new offence of aggravated trespass demonstrates that the act is likewise an attack on the working class as a whole by outlawing trade union picket lines, given that to their minds (and despite evidence to the contrary) the working class (or at least the section that really counts) all actually go to full-time work.

Though the first of these arguments may contain a significant element of truth, both fail to grasp the nature of this nebulous beast. The CJ&POA has been described as a bundle of prejudices, and is perhaps best understood as that - a piece of legislation which a divided Conservative Government can unite around as an attack on their favourite scapegoats. But the CJ&POA functions in this way because, whether they are conscious of it or not, there is a method in their madness. Despite the ditching of the 'petty nationalist' Thatcher, the Conservative Party is still divided over the question of Europe: the problem of class rule in the new economic reality of global finance capital. And the recent crisis over VAT on fuel, with backbench Conservative rebels defying a three line whip to sabotage the government majority, clearly showed up the disunity and lack of direction afflicting the government. The problem they face which seems to be defying any easy resolution is simply the need to impose austerity, the need to attack the gains of an entrenched working class, without destroying the fragile Conservative social consensus represented by the 'Essex Man' phenomenon. With the dream of a property-owning democracy sinking into the nightmare of debt, the consensus is rapidly becoming unravelled, but UK plc cannot retreat. What better tonic than a good old attack on those firmly outside of the deal, the marginalized, whose exclusion the Conservative deal was predicated upon, to stiffen up resolve in the ranks for those attacks which threaten to recompose the class. But even such an apparently uncomplicated weapon has been threatening to blow up in the faces of those trying to use it. We are running ahead of ourselves, however. Before we proceed further we have to consider the context in which the battle is being fought.

The character of the movement against the CJ&POA can only be adequately grasped through an examination of the political context in which it has arisen. The most notable feature of the campaign has been the complete absence of the Labour Party's involvement (save for Tony Benn's speeches) and the effective marginalization of the groups which traditionally scavenge in its detritus. The movement may be considered in some ways paradigmatic of class struggle in the era following the retreat of social democracy: unhindered by any powerful mediating force and, as such, both relatively incoherent in its attempts to express its demands and potentially explosive. We seem to be moving towards a situation where the traditional means of recuperation of struggles and integration of its subjects - the 'left' - is finding itself increasingly incapable of representing struggles occurring outside of the productive sphere. This retreat of social democracy is itself a consequence of new global realities.



## (i) The crisis of representation

## a) The retreat of social democracy:

As the traditional form of mediating the relationship between capital and labour, social democracy, including its radical variants, may be said to be the representation of the trade union consciousness of the working class. Unlike Lenin, who argued that the working class could not develop revolutionary consciousness without external intervention, we would argue that it is the struggles of the working class itself which defetishizes the social relation of capital. But this does not necessarily mean that the working class is just inherently revolutionary. Reformism (or democracy for that matter) is not adequately understood as a con trick perpetrated by the (middle class) left on an otherwise revolutionary class, as many 'ultra-leftists' would have us believe. The tendency to leftism, like the tendency to communism, must be grounded in the social relation of wage labour itself: exploitation mediated by the sale and purchase of labour-power.

Proletarian subjectivity moves along a continuum between the poles of integration and transcendence, poles which represent the acceptance or refusal of the commodity form of labour. Labour-power is a commodity which is not a commodity. A commodity is a thing that is separable and thus alienable from its owner which is produced to be sold; and for capital labour-power is this thing whose exchange-value is the wage and whose use-value is the capacity to create and preserve value. However, not only is labour-power not immediately produced for sale, being produced only as part of the reproduction of human life itself, but it is also not a thing separate from its possessor. The alienation of labour is thus experienced as loss of subjectivity, as estrangement.

Thus the imposition of the commodity form is resisted, leading to the refusal of work, defetishization and the communist tendency. However, in so far as this imposition is accepted, the worker may accept the position of commodity owner in the sphere of exchange and consumption alongside bourgeois and other proletarians alike, and possibly buy a car, house, and other trappings of a 'middle class' identity.

Social democracy represents the acceptance of the commodity-form of labour, the interests of the working class as objects, with trades unions carrying out its collective sale to capital. It represents the interests of a national working class as a whole within capitalism through the use of state intervention against some of the excesses of the market.

Thus struggles against the alienation of wage labour must be recuperated by the left, represented by it, and rendered compatible with the continued objectification of the workers by capital accumulation. And during the period when the refusal of work was manifest, the primary role for revolutionaries was to attack such recuperation, to distinguish the working class as subject from its representation. But it is also necessary to recognize and explore the limits of the recuperative powers of leftism, and this is not possible if the left is reduced to a simple identity with capital (its left wing) rather than grasping it as a form of mediation, a two-way process. Social democracy does not only deliver the working class to capital and preserve national divisions within it, but does so on the basis of being an organizational form through which concessions can be demanded and won from capital, advancing the interests of the working class as a social stock of objective labour-power.

The inherent tendency towards refusal and resistance, a tendency which came to the fore in the post-war revolt against Taylorized labour processes, was recuperated on the basis of the monetarization of frustration: financial compensation for the

experience of alienated labour. Such monetarization of demand was the class meaning of Keynesian demand management. Keynesianism represented the recognition that working class demands could no longer be ignored due to the threat of revolution, but would have to be accommodated and harnessed as the motor of capital accumulation. Thus deficit financing allowed for rising real wages and public spending on welfare, to be repaid by returns from future exploitation.

The basis of social democracy's success was therefore premised on the state's ability to accommodate working class struggles through flexibility in monetary policy, to deliver reforms and concessions which could be recovered from the future production of surplus-value by taxation. As we have seen, this premise has been eroded with the increasing autonomy of global finance capital.<sup>1</sup> With it has come the retreat of social democracy on a global scale.

## b) From Labourism to Blairism:

The Labour Party fell from power when the 'winter of discontent' exposed the limits of attempting to impose monetarist economic measures within a Keynesian institutional framework. Wildcat strikes left the social democratic consensus in tatters; a more radical strategy was required, one of dividing the working class to establish a new Conservative consensus based on the exclusion of those whose exploitation would not produce a sufficient rate of profit. It has taken 15 years in opposition for the Labour Party to respond to the dictatorship of finance capital by planning to scrap the traditional commitment to nationalization. During those 15 years the party has swung to the right, recognising that if it is to win an election it will have to satisfy City analysts that it is capable of imposing as harsh a monetary regime as its opponents. This process has reached its logical conclusion with the election of Tony Blair as leader and his plans to reassure the bankers that his party does not even have a semblance of a commitment to the type of fiscal regime which would allow the diversion of surplus value into loss making nationalized industries and public services.

With the development of this 'new realism' has come the decline in the recuperative capability of the left. But this process has not been smooth. Indeed, as the New Left decided *en masse* to enter the party during the start of the 80s, and enjoying the flexibility that comes with being in opposition, the party swung to the left initially. The left wing of the party has been put under severe pressure since then, however, particularly with Kinnock's 'witch-hunt' of Militant. The left of the party, from being a major force in the 1970s has declined to such an extent that it is rarely encountered, and no longer capable of even the occasional pyrrhic victory at 'Conference'.

A stream of employment laws has imposed this 'new realism' on the trade unions over the years. From being in a position of negotiating over beer and sandwiches at No. 10, and occasionally threatening that their members wouldn't agree to what the government wanted without a concession, union leaders now find themselves in the position of simply having to police their members regardless, clamping down on any initiative which could end in the dreaded sequestration. The inability to win anything through acceptance of the union form has been an invitation to wildcat autonomy that has also been all too rarely accepted. Whether this has been due to a certain loyalty to the form which, for all its 'sell outs', delivered so much in the past, or to an understandable lack of confidence is unclear; but the invitation is unlikely to be retracted.

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But whilst social democracy retains a firm if fragile grip on workplace struggles, the decline in its relevance to non-workplace struggles was brought home by the Poll Tax. Who remembers the 'Stop It' campaign (dubbed Pay It by its detractors), launched by the Labour Party, except the union leaders who supported it? Indeed most people's recollection of the relationship between the Labour Party and the 'Tory Tax' will be the vigour with which Labour councils demonstrated their fiscal responsibility by pursuing non-payers.

With this retreat of mainstream social democracy from the concerns of 'the workers', radical social democracy's task of orienting the struggle towards the labour movement was made intolerably difficult. The SWP's position of orienting opposition towards pressing the unions to veto collection was a non-starter. Militant appeared to do somewhat better, with people going along with their non-workerist 'lobby the Labour council' position to the extent that they took it as an invitation to picket, disrupt or riot. Yet they also failed dismally in their efforts, despite stitching up the 'Federation'. Trying to fit the struggle into a social democratic strait-jacket required an attack on the Trafalgar Square rioters whose actions did not conform with a social democratic definition of working class subjectivity, an attack that even disgusted many loyal members. Not only did they fail to deliver the working class to the labour movement, but also got expelled from their beloved party and lost half their members.

Traditional forms of mediation are in crisis. This can best be illustrated by comparing the movement against the 1994 CJ&POA to that which campaigned against the 1977 Criminal Trespass Law.

### c) From CACTL to fractal:

Squatting, as a violation of the inalienable laws of private property, is clearly a challenge to the ground rules of the social democratic compromise. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, social democracy proved itself to be quite capable of recuperating a significant squatters' struggle. In 1974 the Law Commission published its initial report proposing to replace the 1381 Forcible Entry Acts with a Criminal Trespass Law which would make all forms of trespass, and consequently squatting, illegal. London's relatively well organized squatters responded immediately; at an All London Squatters meeting they decided to set up a campaign to fight the proposals, and the Campaign Against a Criminal Trespass Law (CACTL) was born. Comrades who were involved in the campaign, however, report that CACTL quickly became dominated by Trots, eventually being represented by a couple from the SWP. And this is borne out by CACTL's own propaganda which inevitably played down the effect of the proposals on squatters in order to present the proposed legislation as an attack on workers. In much the same way as the SWP has tried to steer the anti-CJ&POA movement, CACTL sat about orienting opposition towards the labour movement.

By arguing that the legislation was aimed at factory occupations, however, CACTL had remarkable success. Between 1971 and 1975 over 150,000 workers were involved in over 200 occupations, ranging from those at Fisher-Bendix in Kirkby in 1972 and 1974 against redundancies to the occupation of Hopkinson's in Huddersfield in 1975 for a wage increase. Student occupations were also recurrent events during the 1970s, especially during 1976. And that same year, while the Labour left were decrying Callaghan's 'betrayal' at their conference and wondering what to do, Ford workers at Dagenham demonstrated their contempt for leftist mediation by rioting, holding the police at bay while they smashed up and set fire to various parts of the plant. With workplace struggles raging, the workerist card played by CACTL turned out to be a trump, and they began to receive invitations to send speakers to trades councils, trade union branches and student unions.

Radical social democracy was able to recuperate and represent the struggle because it was able to deliver results. By 1976 CACTL had received support from 36 trades councils, 85 trade union branches and 51 student unions, and by the following year not only had the national unions ACTT, AUEW-TASS, and NUPE passed resolutions in opposition to the proposals, but the TUC General Council had also voted to oppose the CTL. Orienting towards the labour movement in this context meant that CACTL was able to mobilize massive support for its demonstrations. In the face of this opposition the Law Commission watered down its initial plan massively.

The 1977 Criminal Law Act represented a compromise which meant that squatting, whilst more difficult, was still legal. The act, which has been the basic squatting law until the 1994 CJ&POA changes, only legislated against violent or threatening entry, refusal to leave when requested by a displaced residential occupier or a protected intending occupier, trespassing with an offensive weapon, squatting an embassy or consul, or resisting a bailiff executing a possession order. A long way short of making squatting itself a criminal offence. The price paid for CACTL's successful recuperation, however, was that many people were under the misapprehension that squatting *had* been made illegal, and CACTL's own propaganda reinforced this belief, inevitably undermining the squatting movement. Indeed in the summer of 1978 the Advisory Service for Squatters felt it necessary to mount a campaign against this leftist counter-information with the slogan 'squatting is still legal'.

What is most notable, however, is the fact that *three years* before the proposals were to become law there was already a significant campaign of opposition. Less than *three months* before the Criminal Justice Bill was due to become law there was still no specific campaign against it. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, bang! May 1st last year, 25,000 ravers on the streets of London and the left nowhere to be seen, a massive party in Trafalgar Square and everyone dancing to the deliciously ambiguous chant of 'Kill the Bill!'



## (ii) Alternative lifestyles and the CJ&POA Part 5

### a) Monetarism and mass unemployment:

In 1976 the then British Prime Minister told his Labour Party Conference that deficit financing of public demand could no longer be sustained: 'We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour that option no longer exists and that so far as it ever did exist, it only worked by injecting inflation into the economy.' With that statement, the Labour Party launched its policy of monetarist economic measures within a Keynesian political framework. A policy of 'sound money' demanded the reduction of the state deficit through the abandonment of full employment guarantees, cuts in welfare expenditure and the scrapping of unproductive producers, or a boom in productive accumulation which would presuppose either a rigorous intensification of work or a major reduction in wages.

The struggles of the late 1970s and the 1980s have been well documented elsewhere. We are all only too aware of the extent to which heavy defeats have cowed the working class. Since the defeat of the miners, the level of strike activity has subsided massively. But it is all too easy to allow oneself to become demoralized by the apparent success of our enemy. Whilst the quality of our lives may have been diminished by the violent and repressive accompaniments of monetary terrorism we must also consider the quantitative aspects of this shitty system - after all, our alienation rests upon the numerical ratio that is capitalist exploitation. A balance sheet is required.<sup>2</sup>

Wave after wave of redundancies have swelled the ranks of the unemployed to the extent that the leftist's hand-wringing when the numbers on the dole reached 1,000,000 now seems ridiculous. The abandonment of full employment and the creation of this huge reserve army of industrial labour has given capital a powerful weapon with which to try to undermine the previous gains of the working class. And the fear of joining those ranks has played a major role in undermining workers' confidence in their ability to resist the restructuring of labour processes. The intensification of work and the imposition of overtime underpinned the apparent miracle of Thatcherism.

But whilst the reserve army may have played a major role in containing wages and intensifying work, the extent to which the British working class's gains have been clawed back has been limited. Throughout Europe, capital faces the same problem of working class entrenchment, a proletariat which refuses the cuts in wages and welfare that have been suffered in the US. Whilst in the economic textbooks the price of labour-power rises and falls in accordance with its supply and demand, in reality wages have tended to be contained only during periods when the level of unemployment is actually rising. They have not been slashed to the extent that will attract money capital towards productive investment here rather than to the other emerging economic blocs. Likewise it has proved impossible to cut that part of state spending which constitutes the social wage to a degree comparable with the US, despite the constant attacks on the NHS and those on benefit.

Many attempts have been made over the years to restructure the benefit system in order to encourage claimants to compete for low paid jobs, most recently the 'actively seeking work' stipulations and the plans in the pipeline for the Job Seeker's Allowance. With a continuing lack of productive investment the British state seems to be opting for the strategy of a 'low wage economy', competing directly with the likes of Portugal, Greece and Ireland, as evidenced by the Social Chapter opt-out. But there seems to be a bug in that circuit necessary but extraneous to the circuit of capital's reproduction

process: that of the reproduction of the peculiar commodity labour-power; a social process which is subject to particular forms of contestation given that the commodity is the capacity and, crucially, willingness to work. Thus at times when unemployment has been rising in the UK the formation of reserves of idle labour-power desperate for work has been subject to a counter-tendency of the development of alternative lifestyles which take as their point of departure not the wage but the dole as their means of social reproduction. Such lifestyles have undermined, albeit insufficiently compared to their visibility, the state's attempts to impose a tighter relationship between consumption and work, the life-blood of capital.

### b) No Future:

Given the close relationship between alternative lifestyles and music, and the importance of music in providing something concrete within which value can invest itself in its repeated search for a new generation of consumers, the word 'alternative' needs to be treated with a degree of caution. Nevertheless, not all youth cultures are the same. Some contain more or less positive tendencies than others, a greater or lesser potential for recognizing the contradictions inherent in the phenomenon and developing a practical critique of their grounding. And all 'alternative' lifestyles are by definition outside of the remit of the usual forms of political representation.

Music was in a moribund state in the mid 1970s. The musicians of the '68 generation had become tired and boring, the naive optimism of hippydom out of tune with the harsh realities of ongoing class conflict. No amount of lustre or glitter on the stage sets of glam rock could disguise the fact that all was not well in the (music) factory, and it was obvious that the new subjects of struggle required new overtures. And as Callaghan declared his intention to launch the war of austerity in 1976, a different declaration of war was beginning to reverberate through distorted amplifiers in the back rooms and basements of London: the declaration of war on 'society' by punk. Punk was able to articulate the frustrations of the new generation. But in comparison to the wave of youth revolt in Italy, both inside and outside of the factories, punk was only a caricature of revolt, superficial nihilism.





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Punk was inherently contradictory. Central to it was the 'DIY' ethos, but it lacked an explicit critique of the commodity-form. This lack of critique allowed self-valorization to give way to recuperation, giving a long overdue kick up the backside to the entrepreneurs involved in the 'youth culture' industry. The shops of King's Road and Camaby Street testified to the process of turning rebellion into money, shelves laden with designer bondage trousers, studded leather, mass-produced 'Destroy' and 'Vive La Revolution' t-shirts, and badges. But the recuperative powers of these new commodities were not without limit. For the punks that had taken the mocking lyrics of their anti-heroes seriously, the sight of all this commodity capital awaiting realization, and the selling out to major labels of the biggest bands, was an insult they could not leave unanswered. They realized that 'the great rock and roll swindle' had in fact been perpetrated on them.

Perhaps the most important point, however, is the fact that selling an image of revolution to keep would-be revolutionaries from the real thing requires that they have the necessary purchasing power. And many of the working class youth attracted to punk were on the dole and therefore skint. The time was right for a sub-genre to emerge from all this shit to explicitly politicize the DIY ethos that punk stood for.

#### c) Anarcho-Punk:

'Do you believe in the system?' Well OK. I believe in anarchy in the UK'. These words from the release of the first Crass record on their own non-profit making label were accompanied by the words 'Pay no more than £2'. If you still had to pay for your anarchy at least it was affordable! Crass had the means to release their own cheap records, play cheap gigs, and promote other bands who shared their ethos. The anarcho-punk scene soon became a vibrant alternative to the punk scene it declared dead. The anarchism of the typical anarcho-punk was however little more than militant liberalism. Crass had their roots in the old peace movement, and largely ignoring the harsh realities of class warfare in the world outside their commune, set about promoting the ideas of pacifism and lifestyle politics. Offensive though many of their dogmas were, the anarcho-punks must be judged not just by the lyrics they sang along to, but, crucially, by what they actually did.

During the early 1980s, the main political focus for the new breed was the CND demonstrations which drew hundreds of thousands of concerned liberals to Hyde Park on a yearly basis. Grouping under a collection of black flags the anarchists would hand out leaflets and fanzines encouraging personal revolution and then heckle the speakers and try to storm the stage. As numbers swelled, the anti-militarist struggle was taken into the heart of enemy territory with the Stop The City actions when banks and rollers would get smashed under the cover of a pacifist carnival. The obsession with lifestyle politics, however, was a major factor hindering the development of the 'movement', making links with those who didn't fit problematic, as would become apparent during the miners' strike. Far too many anarchists simply changed their clothes, diet, drugs and musical tastes, deluding themselves that by doing so they were creating a new world within the belly of the old which would wither away once it recognized its comparative existential poverty. But most of the criticisms of lifestyle politics, then and now, were and are mere defences by militants prepared to accept the continual deferral of pleasure in favour of the 'hard work' of politics.<sup>3</sup> The desire to create the future in the present has always been a strength of anarchists. How one lives is political. Thus the anarchists may be considered to have constituted a political movement seeking social reproduction unmediated by wage labour.

In 1980 Crass played the Stonehenge festival and a close link with the free festival scene subsequently evolved. Likewise the anarchists gave a massive impetus to the squatting scene left over from the 70s. By the mid 1980s, virtually every town in England and Wales had its squats. Bands were formed, venues either squatted or hired dirt cheap (church halls and the like which meant no bar - take your own home-brew) and gigs organized, often benefits which would succeed in raising money despite cheap entry because the bands would play for next to nothing. During the summer months much of this activity would shift on to the free festival circuit, meeting up with those who had chosen to spend the whole year travelling between peace camps and festivals, and who in turn would benefit from the links with the urban scene (news, contacts, places to rest and repair, opportunities for fraud etc.).

This scene was particularly well organized, and more politicized, in the cities. On Bristol's Cheltenham Road, the Demolition Ballroom, Demolition Diner, and Full Marx book shop provided a valuable organizational focus, with the activities of the squatted venue and cafe supplemented by the information and contact address of the lefty book shop. Brixton squatters not only had their own squatted cafes, crèches and book shop, but also *Crowbar* their own *Class War* style squatting oriented paper. Strong links were forged with the squatting movement on the continent, particularly Germany, and draft dodgers from Italy were regularly encountered. And with direct communication supplemented by the then fortnightly *Black Flag*, a couple of phone calls and a short article could mobilize numbers in solidarity with other struggles.

Whilst the anarcho-punk scene created a not insignificant area of autonomy from capital, such autonomy was always disfigured by the continued existence of exchange relations. Going to gigs and eating in squat cafes, even brewing your own beer to share with mates, all required money. And free festivals, whilst standing in stark contrast to the commercialism of Glastonbury, were anything but - there was no entry fee and no-one would let you starve if you were skint, but drugs in particular cost money.<sup>4</sup> Unless you wanted to cloud your relationships, obscuring lines of solidarity and friendship by becoming a dealer, if only to cover your own dope requirements, money remained a problem. There was always a correspondence between the satisfaction of needs and the need for money, a correspondence that contradicted the professed desire to abolish the filthy stuff.

#### d) Fragmentation of anarcho-punk:

This contradiction partially explains the subsequent fragmentation and decline of the anarcho-punk squatting/travelling movement. On the one hand, the state relaxed credit restrictions, abandoning tight monetary policy, producing the credit-fuelled boom which preceded the 1987 stock market crash. This led to a rapid fall in the number of jobless. Many previously involved with organizing in and around the squatting scene got jobs during the boom, and whilst many remained living in squats (to stay with friends and save on rent), momentum was being lost. Individualism tended to replace a collective approach to social problems, as wage earners and dealers could afford to accept the position money held within the scene. The carrot of the boom, however would not have had the same impact without the repeated blows with the stick of state repression.

With unemployment falling, it became easier for the state to make the benefit system more punitive. The changes in 1987 and 1988 certainly increased the disciplining role of the welfare state, thereby throwing down a gauntlet to the lifestyle of work-rejection. Benefits for 16 and 17 year olds were scrapped in favour of an extension of YTS slave labour, thereby removing



the possibility of work avoidance (except by begging) for the young school leavers who had always been central to the movement. The introduction of the Job Training Scheme and the availability for work requirements also had an effect. Restart interviews were easy enough for most people sufficiently clued up to blag their way through, but tended to encourage people to rely on their own wits. Because these changes were ultimately divisive, they encouraged people to look after number one. Attempts to organize against them were met with responses that expressed a distinct lack of solidarity, and this reflected not only the nature of the attack but also the divisions that had emerged within the scene.

The biggest causes of such fragmentation were the smashing of the miners and printworkers on the one hand and the repression of the festival scene on the other. The anarchism of the anarcho-punk scene was always pretty incoherent, a militant liberalism that sought to destroy the state yet which was committed to pacifism. Within the movement there would be differences, some placing greater emphasis on non-violence or animal rights, some more committed to a revolutionary class position. For a while these underlying differences could be glossed over, and whilst people could argue about the 1981 riots, for example, it was just talk. But the miners' strike presented a major challenge by its longevity and opportunity for involvement, one that caused underlying differences to surface with a resultant divergence between those who dismissed the miners as violent macho men performing an ecologically unsound activity, and those who, despite a certain amount of confusion, recognized that there was a war going on and, whatever it was about, they had to choose the violence of the pickets over that of the state's thugs.

Most anarchists supported the miners, even if such support was not of a particularly practical nature, though bands like Crass and Poison Girls and numerous others played benefits for the miners to give some material assistance. The resultant defeat therefore had a demoralizing effect on the anarcho-punk scene.

The same conflict between liberalism and class struggle anarchism came to the fore with the Wapping dispute the following year. The movement was divided between those who saw the need to support the printworkers and those who dismissed them as sexist, racist, homophobic macho men. However even amongst those more sympathetic to the former view were some who argued that it was better that pickets got trampled by police horses than horses get broken legs by pickets rolling marbles under their hooves. The defeat of the printworkers was another demoralizing factor, but also one which accelerated the process of fragmentation. The inherent contradiction in the movement led to a substantial parting of ways, one pole devoting itself almost exclusively to the moral crusade of animal lib and many of those they fell out with getting so fed up with lifestyleism that they joined one of the national anarchist organizations.

Meanwhile those who had been more attracted to travelling than squatting or political activity were being put under severe pressure. The Stonehenge festival was banned in 1985, and the determined attempt to defy the ban was met with a response not unlike that experienced by the miners, culminating in the famous 'battle of the beanfield'.<sup>5</sup> The following year the state brought in the Public Order Act, section 13 of which established a 4 mile radius exclusion zone around the stones. Other sections gave new powers to proscribe demonstrations and extended the law against trespass. The former were successfully challenged on the streets of London by the Campaign Against The Public Order Act/Campaign Against Police Repression; but whilst many travellers have battled bravely in adverse conditions, the police have been able to use section 39 to intimidate and harass

them, continually moving them on. Travelling and free festivals continued, but, with the loss of the weeks-long Stonehenge focus, went into something of a decline. The police-benefit festival at Glastonbury,<sup>6</sup> extortionately priced but affordable to those now working, mopped up. And before they were successfully excluded in recent years, convoys of travellers used to gatecrash it (literally), with many others bunking in, and so the new reality was gradually accepted, particularly as the 'unfree' festivals were full of punters waiting to be parted from their cash.

The nomadic dream of rural idyll gradually gave way to the reality of being moved from noisy lay-by to squalid car park, with decent sites often blocked off by farmers and local councils. As the links with squatters and politics became more distanced, so the mysticism of the 60s hippies, aided by reminiscence of the magical stones now out of reach, took further hold, alongside cynicism. Alienation from capitalist society increasingly expressed itself through alcoholism and heroin addiction, bringing new problems to deal with or run away from. Ghettoization increased, with the 'you've had a bath so you must be a cunt' mentality increasing.

Whilst the late 80s witnessed a decline in the anarcho-punk phenomenon, it did not disappear. The Poll Tax riot demonstrated that the anger of the punks only needed an invitation to riot to stop it being internalized and bitterly misdirected. And despite all the repression since 1985, the loss of direction, supportive links, and ghettoization, a significant travelling scene survived to see the psychedelic cavalry arrive in 1992.

#### p) Acid House / Rave:

When acid house parties became popularized beyond exclusive clubs with an explosion of huge warehouse parties in 1988, media trend-setters dubbed it the 'summer of love'. It soon became clear, however, that despite the squatting of venues the whole phenomena was becoming subordinate to the interests of a new breed of entrepreneur, and gradually the rave scene has tended to move from squatted warehouses and country fields to licensed venues. It is now well known that the much vaunted love did not extend to letting overheated ravers drink from taps in night club toilets when the dehydrating effects of ecstasy could be exploited to flog overpriced bottled water. The acid house / rave scene provided a perfect opportunity for a rapid accumulation of capital with little outlay, offset only by the risks involved in the illegality. As recognition of the commercial potential of the phenomena grew so free parties went into decline.

Whilst the rave scene may have permitted the opening up of a new area for commercial activity, it has not been one that established capital has been able to fully penetrate, and this is not just due to the illegality of the drugs industry which has an unprecedented cultural importance to raves. Surplus-value has instead been largely distributed amongst a new generation of petty entrepreneurs, from dealers to DJs and home-growers to laser operators, and whilst night-club owners have benefited from police repression of illegal parties, established interests in the brewing and music industries have been worried by the impenetrability of the rave scene for their products. As much of the money circulating in the rave scene becomes siphoned off by DJs and owners of sound systems and light shows etc., often to supplement their dole, at the expense of it being spent on records and CDs, the MTV-promoted grunge phenomenon has been needed to help maintain the level of the music industry's commodity capital consumed by the youth market.

As for ravers themselves, one has to consider the extent to which their lifestyle is 'alternative', if only because of the state's attempts to repress the unlicensed rave scene and possible

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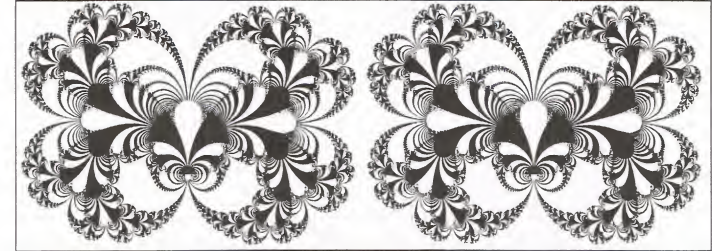
reactions to that repression. Quite clearly ravers are not self-consciously political in the way that anarcho-punks were, because anarcho-punk's premise was a critique of the commercialism of the 'punk industry' whilst the rave scene was built on an acceptance of the commodification of squat parties.

There has, however, been something of a reaction to the crass commercialism of rave culture, although this has been predominantly mystic, seeing crude material interest as being at odds with the 'spiritual significance' of the rave high in which the 'collective consciousness of the tribe' is rediscovered, apparently.<sup>7</sup> And the development of a more sober critique (apart from the practical one of bunking in to raves) has been hindered by the fact that the sound systems which provide free parties do so with equipment they have accumulated by putting on licensed raves in clubs for money. Many of these entrepreneurs reinvest their share of surplus-value but do so predominantly for the enhanced use-value of their equipment rather than because it can make them even more money. Simply enjoying the parties they put on and the status that comes with it they impose the rule of money on ravers, but not for the sake of money itself.

Otterbourne, Hampshire police repeatedly asserted that there would in no circumstances be a festival, only to have to allow one to prevent the county's arteries of commerce being clogged up by would-be revellers refusing to go home. Since then police have committed resources to a nationwide surveillance operation, hounded travellers persistently and demanded increased powers to ensure such scenarios are not repeated. With the passing of the CJ&POA such powers have been granted.

### e) CJ&POA Part 5:

Following the release of the Birmingham 6, the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice was set up to find a way of solving the crisis of confidence in the British legal system. One of its central recommendations was that the right to silence be maintained; but by ite the party with the 'back to basics' programme. In October 1993, after both the opposition parties had banged the 'law and order' drum at their conferences, Michael Howard gave a 'hang 'em and flog 'em' speech to the Tory party conference, presenting a 27 point law and order package which became the basis for both the Criminal Justice



The recession of the early 1990s has seen youth unemployment shoot up rapidly, however, and with it the need for a lifestyle compatible with being skint. It has enabled the development of the 'eco-warriors' that have so infuriated the government through taking anti-roads protests beyond 'NIMBYism'.<sup>8</sup> But alongside clauses seeking to effectively criminalize anti-roads actions, squatting, travelling and hunt-sabotage, the CJ&POA also contains clauses specifically aimed at raves. In order to understand why, it is necessary to consider the events of 1992, events that left landowners, police and MPs demanding action.

In 1992 the Exodus collective in Luton began putting on free raves that grew to attract 10,000-strong crowds. But the most significant events in the 1992 rave calendar were the free festival at Castlemorton in the Malverns and the Torpedo Town festival at Otterbourne near Twyford Down. These saw a new and exciting fusion of the rave scene with the leftovers of the travelling scene. Such a fusion posed the possibility, on the one hand, of an auto-critique of the commercialism of raves, learning from the old nomadic anarcho-punks, and a critique of soap-avoiding ghettoization on the other. Such a prospect admittedly seemed fanciful at the time given the level of mutual dislike - ravers dismissed as 'part-timers' with no respect for 'their' sites, and 'scrounging' travellers apparently confirming popular prejudices.

But what was far more significant in the short term was the fact that by coming together, sheer weight of numbers meant that each group enabled each other to defy police bans, raising the prospect that the steady process of the state's crushing of the free aspects of each genre could be put into reverse. In

Bill and the Police and Magistrates Courts Bill.

As well as a relatively straightforward, if draconian, increase in the repressive powers of the state (abolishing the right to silence etc.), the proposals attacked every conceivable scapegoat that the party could agree to hate, from the young killers of Jamie Bulger (provisions for children's prisons) to paedophiles (extending the powers of police to raid premises on suspicion they may contain child pornography).<sup>9</sup> Had the CJB stuck to attacking these relatively easy targets the response would probably have amounted to little more than condemnation from the liberal establishment and social workers. But the CJB also contained Part 5 devoted almost entirely to an attack on squatters, travellers, hunt-sabs, road protesters and, importantly, ravers, and these groups have refused to be scapegoated quite so easily.

What unites these groups in such a way that they have become such hate targets of the government is that, although they may be a long way from consciously declaring war on capital, they share a common refusal of the work-ethic, of a life subordinated to wage labour. As such, they pose an alternative to the life of desperately looking for work, which must be made unattractive. But the state is not alone in not having a clear understanding of the class meaning of Part 5 of the CJ&POA; for this is something which the representatives of the opposition to the act also seem to be painfully incapable of grasping.



## Part Two: From Campaign to Movement

### Latent and Manifest Contradictions



Class war or a liberal lobby? A movement to defend autonomy and subversion or an appeal for rights? Anyone who has had any involvement in the campaign against the Criminal Justice Bill, if only to the extent of going on one of the three national marches, must be aware that the opposition to the act is riven by this contradiction. 'Keep it Fluffy' or 'Keep it Spikey'? 'Kill the Bill' or 'Chill the Bill'? Communists undoubtedly know which side they are on. But this contradiction exists not just in the antagonism between the different components which make up the campaign, most famously between the media *beste noire* Class War and the media darlings in Freedom Network. It also runs through the hearts of many of the individuals for whom this is their first political engagement. The division exists in the contradictory things the same people have said – and, more importantly, *done* – in different circumstances. It is therefore worthwhile examining the basis of this contradiction, as well as taking sides, for the emergence of a new generation of rebels is dependent upon them understanding and seeking to resolve their contradictory interpretations of the world around them.



## (i) Subjects and Representatives

a) Left Behind:

The retreat of parliamentary social democracy may have caused problems for Trotskyism's engagement with the opposition to the Poll Tax, but at least the Labour Party opposed the Poll Tax in parliament, enabling an argument to be made that they offered a hope of salvation worth pursuing, lobbying, pressuring etc. Orienting opposition to the CJB towards the labour movement however would quickly come up against the problem that not only did the Labour Party not oppose the CJB in parliament,<sup>10</sup> but also that its leader was happy to boast that he had even suggested sections of it (the reintroduction of stop and search powers). It is clearly no surprise that the left was incapable of launching a movement against the CJB.<sup>11</sup>

b) Carry on regardless:

If we understand leftism as a form of mediation, it becomes clear that the crisis of representation does not just open up new possibilities for autonomous class struggle, but also poses new problems. Social democracy provided a political form through which working class antagonism could be expressed. In order to recuperate through representation, the left had to arrange meetings as well as stitch them up, and organize demonstrations as well as police them. For revolutionaries who used to intervene in or heckle at those meetings, leaflet disrupt or attempt to riot on those demonstrations, the crisis of leftist mediation poses a dilemma. Meetings and demonstrations need to be organized in order to bring together atomized individuals so that they can become a collective force.

When the CJB was drawn up, it immediately became clear that contesting its implementation would require drawing strength from the breadth of its attack. Practical links would have to be made between the different marginalized groups affected in order that they could reinforce each others resistance. A movement would have to be forged, beginning by launching a campaign of opposition to the bill, drawing in groups, mediating between them, co-ordinating activities, organizing demonstrations etc. But with the left incapable of performing this role, who would launch a campaign against the CJB?

As we have seen, squatters and travellers have become relatively disorganized and depoliticized since the mid 1980s. Some squatters are still involved in organizing politically around squatting, and the [2] Centre in Brixton is still functioning, even if political activities are being increasingly marginalized. But in 1994, squatters were in no position to repeat their initial success of 1974, and travellers were in an even worse position. A nomadic lifestyle does not lend itself to co-ordinated resistance, and the CJ&POA's provisions allowing police to seize and destroy vehicles means that travellers would be risking their homes by leading a confrontation with the law. Leaving the struggle to those with the luxury of being able to

confront the law on less perilous terrain, many travellers have been consistent with the tendency to try to escape the clutches of the state and have therefore emigrated.

The nature of hunt sabotage and anti-roads protests meanwhile lent itself to a quite different response to the challenge contained in the bill. Most of those involved in these activities justify their actions in moral terms, and it is exactly this commitment to a militant liberal ideology which has made them determined to contest the new laws. For the sake of some external morally pure referent, 'the planet' or 'innocent animals', just about any sacrifice is worth making. Thus the dominant tendency in response to the criminalization of these activities was that of a renewed determination to carry on regardless. But, laudable though this determination may be, this tendency neglected the importance of making solidaristic links, of the need to build a national campaign of opposition.

c) Advance to Go:

On the one hand the crisis of representation, and on the other the opposing tendencies amongst targeted subjects towards running away or carrying on regardless. It is these factors which have combined to allow the 'fluffies'<sup>12</sup> to represent the movement against the CJ&POA; and had it not been for them there would not have been any significant campaign against the CJB, and, ironically given their opposition to (anti-hierarchical) violence, no Hyde Park riot. The main organizers behind the May 1st demo were the Advance Party, made up of the petty entrepreneurs of the rave scene who had woken up to the implications of the bill for unlicensed parties. They used the channels of communication established for organizing raves; to those not involved in the scene the demo seemed to come out of nowhere. As news reached DIY enthusiasts around the country local anti-CJB groups began to spring up, co-ordinated through the Freedom Network, and the 'fluffy' character of the campaign became established.

The connection between 'fluffy' ideology and people with a penchant for shelves from 'Do It All' might seem far fetched, but DIY refers not to this but to a relatively new cultural phenomenon. Communicated through a host of fanzines, DIY culture celebrates self-organization. It is anarcho-punk stripped of its subversive potential, with neither punk's anger nor anarchy's politics. Thus it appeals both to the (predominantly mystic) alternative ravers who reject the crass commercialism of the dominant rave scene in favour of self-organized parties (free and otherwise), and to the 'eco-reformists' in and around the Green Party who are disillusioned by its attempts at electoral respectability but who would rather celebrate recycling their rubbish, getting an allotment, and the worship of Gaia than get involved with Earth First!<sup>13</sup>

## (ii) The world-view of the 'fluffy'

a) Basis of liberal ideology and its antithesis:

Fluffy ideology is merely the latest development in liberal ideology, and can be summed up as the view that society is nothing more than the aggregation of individuals. We have consistently countered this by arguing that we live in a *class* society, and that the struggle we are engaged in is not a question of civil liberties but a moment in the class war. The problem is that we are, each of us, an individual with our own subjectivity, and a member of a class. The contradiction between class war

and liberal lobby is rooted in the contradiction of bourgeois society as a contradictory unity of the spheres of production and circulation, a society characterized by *class* exploitation mediated by the 'free' sale and purchase of *individual* labour-powers. Getting to grips with this contradiction in the movement requires grappling with the problematic of proletarian subjectivity.<sup>14</sup>

As we saw when discussing the problem of reformism, proletarian subjectivity moves along a continuum between the 10



poles of integration and transcendence. It is living activity which constitutes both the dialectic of capital - alienated subjectivity - and the counter-dialectic of class struggle - the subjectivity of the working class. Acceptance of the commodity form of labour allows the proletarian to enter the sphere of the circulation of commodities as a sovereign individual relating to other individuals through the reified world of market relations. This is the world of freedom and equality guaranteed by the rights of the individual. This is the immediate appearance of bourgeois society so beloved by its apologists. This is the basis of liberal ideology, the world of atomized citizens all equal before the law.

The only thing which is really free in this world however is money, and the only equality that of the equivalence of different activities as abstract labour. The essence of bourgeois society is class exploitation in the sphere of production, unfreedom and inequality. The appearance of bourgeois society as an aggregation of individuals is not an illusion, but an abstraction from this exploitation. Thus, despite this apparent freedom and equality we find the tendency of proletarian subjectivity towards resistance, refusal, struggle and class consciousness.

But therein lies the problematic. Whilst an individual proletarian may adopt the viewpoint of an atomized individual and *act as such* by him- or herself, the development of working class subjectivity, thinking and *acting* as a class, can only be a part of a *collective* process of realization. Thus working class subjectivity, the transcendence of liberalism, is not immediately given as certain autonomists and 'ultra-leftists' would have it, but must be composed out of struggle.

As workerists will tell you, the realm of production brings proletarians together, in contrast to the atomization in the realm of circulation. But it brings us together only as components of collective exploitation. To the extent that the working class is composed by capital itself, it remains fractured, as capital-in-general itself is fractured into the particular capitals which constitute it. And even within each collective labour process, the co-operative nature of the labour confronts each individual as a hostile power to the extent that it has been really subsumed by capital. Thus the development of an antagonistic working class subjectivity occurs only to the extent that divisions are overcome, whether it be through struggle within and against production (strikes etc., breaking the fragmentation of individuals joined only by assembly lines or telecommunication cables), or struggles outside of production (riots, occupations etc., breaking the atomization of individuals connected to 'communities' only by the market and ballot box). Either way, the working class develops its own unalienated collective subjectivity only through the initiation, development, interconnection and generalization of the multiplicity of proletarian struggles towards the *struggle of the proletariat*.

**b) Why liberalism now - an historical perspective:**

The above may best be illustrated by looking at the problem historically. Given its basis in the *real* abstraction that is the atomized individual within bourgeois society, it should be clear that liberalism becomes transcended by the process of working class self-formation.

Conversely, an eclipse of a class offensive will inevitably see its return, particularly amongst those most atomized through this decomposition; and so it has proved. Capital's counter-offensive since the 1970s has fragmented the class. Many sites of concentration of the working class have been restructured, dispersed or closed down altogether - industrial, residential and recreational alike. Divisions have increased, between north and south, employed and unemployed, skilled and unskilled etc. Repeats from the golden age of situation comedy clearly demonstrate the extent to which working class subjectivity

imposed itself on the 1970s; no Prime Minister in those days would have dreamt of calling society 'classless'. In the 1990s, far fewer people hold a class perspective, whilst a communist perspective seems to most people who encounter it to be more a matter of semi-religious faith than an expression of a real tendency within society.

The lack of a class perspective and dominance of liberal ideas within the anti-CJB campaign was amongst other things a result of the relative lack of (obvious) class struggle within the UK in recent years. The 1984/85 miners' strike was probably the last battle whose stakes were such that it *demanded* to be understood in terms of a war between classes rather than between a particular set of workers and their bosses. As for class struggle in the 1990s, the movement against the Gulf War presented itself in predominantly moral terms, the 1993 campaign against pit closures presented itself as a defence of the 'national interest', whilst the anti-roads movement tends to present itself as a defence of 'the planet'.

In viewing the problem of liberalism historically, however, it is also necessary to consider the weight of dominant historiography. For us, history is the history of class struggle, whilst bourgeois historians recognize only the result, not the process. The development of working class power during periods of class recomposition has often been recognized by the state in the granting of rights. Such rights, however, are not just a neutral barometer of working class pressure to be defended uncritically, since they play a role in decomposing the class as citizens. As the class eventually retreats, what remains are the rights it has won. And the bourgeois mind then interprets history in terms of the granting of rights and their most prominent individual advocates, leaving the underlying class movement unrecognized. The liberal is then left with a distorted understanding of the historical precedents to their struggle. Thus many liberals, including those in Freedom Network, look to the examples set by Gandhi and Emily Pankhurst, ignoring the class offensives which underpinned the end of colonialism in India and the granting of universal suffrage in the UK.

**c) Liberalism and social positions:**

The connection between liberalism and the social positions of its adherents is usually grasped in terms of them being 'middle class wankers'. Though this is undoubtedly true of supporters of Charter 88 and Liberty, and may describe the family background of many fluffies, the influence of fluffy ideology within the campaign can be better understood by a closer examination of their current positions within capitalist society. The CJB&POA Part 5 is an attack on marginal elements rejecting the conformity of the 'traditional working class'. Within its scope therefore, including as it does a clamp down on unlicensed raves, are hippy entrepreneurs who have a material interest in adopting a liberal position of defending freedom (to make money in their case, to dance in fields etc. in the case of their punters); adopting a class position would expose the tensions between those who sell and those who always buy, the personifications of the opposing extremes of commodity metamorphosis.

By far the majority in the movement, however, are young unemployed who have no material interest in obscuring class divisions. But this very position of unemployment reinforces the apparent truth of liberal ideology as the claimant exclusively inhabits the realm of circulation and exchange, experiencing only one facet of capitalism. Many in the movement relate to money only as the universal equivalent, as purchasing power, not as the face of the boss. Their income is not payment for exploitation as a component of a collective workforce, but apparently a function of their individual human needs.

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Whilst the claimant's pound coin is worth every bit as much as that of the company director, the *quantitative* difference in the amount they have to spend becomes a *qualitative* one that becomes recognized as class inequality, especially if the claimant has not chosen the dole as a preference, has family commitments, or lives in a working class community. But young free and single claimants who have chosen to be on the dole, particularly if they have never worked, more so if they come from a middle class background, and if the housing benefit pays for a flat in an area shared by students, yuppies and other claimants alike, and especially if the higher echelons of a hierarchical education system have increased their sense of personal self-worth, will tend towards the one sided view of the world they inhabit that is liberalism.

Such a tendency is, of course, transformed by experience. For the individuals who engage in the collective struggles of, say, anti-roads protests, there is the possibility of moving beyond liberalism towards a critique of capitalism. To the extent that such activities remain the domain of dedicated 'cross-class' minorities however, it is more likely that a liberal viewpoint will be retained in the modified form of militant liberalism.

On the other hand, no such modification can be expected through the world of DIY culture. The collective experience of the rave, simultaneous movement to a pre-determined rhythm with spontaneous outbreaks of cheering or mass hugging, offers the illusion of unity but, once the 'E' has worn off, leaves the individual little closer to becoming a social individual with meaningful bonds than before. The experience of defending a rave against the police, on the other hand, does lend itself to the development of working class subjectivity; but our 'fluffy friends' do not seem to have involved themselves with this most positive aspect of the rave scene, preferring the 'positive vibes' of paganism, Sufism, Taoism or some other theological bullshit.

As for the other aspects of the DIY world, fanzine production often preserves atomization. Either the production of a single person, or a collection of articles with no editorial policy, it serves as a vessel for individual viewpoints to be aired unanswered, there is none of the discussion or debate leading to the development of inter-subjectivity that is required in a collective project. And to the extent that DIY culture concerns itself with grand social problems it does so by fetishizing either the power of the individual 'ethical consumer' or that of the example-setting pioneer in self-sufficiency.

The failure to recognize the need to overcome the atomization of individuals through collective struggles in which they can become social individuals, becomes, not a failure, but a virtue in the world of DIY. As a result, the liberalism of the fluffy is far worse than that of any of its predecessors.

### d) Fluffy liberalism versus militant liberalism:

Many who have been on the national demonstrations may be under the illusion that the fluffies are simply the pacifists of the

1980s re-emerging from the woodwork. There are however important differences between fluffism and the pacifism of the old peace movement. Pacifists at least recognized the state as a social force of violent coercion that needed to be confronted for freedom to have any meaning. Fluffism on the other hand takes liberalism to its logical extreme (and is even more incoherent as a result). The fluffy view of society as an aggregation of individuals denies the possibility of recognizing the state as a *social* force; below their suits and uniforms the bailiffs, police, property speculators, industrialists and even Michael Howard and his cohorts are just individual human beings. Fluffies assume therefore that all individuals have a common human interest. Any conflicts which arise in society can, by implication, only be the results of misplaced fears or misunderstandings.

This view underpinned the fluffies' conception of how the campaign against the CJB needed to proceed. As the CJB could only be the result of prejudice, the best way to counter it would be to demonstrate to those nice men in suits that they really had nothing to fear: that beneath the dreadlocks and funny clothes, strange ideas and new-fangled music, the marginalized community was really made up of respectable and honest human beings making a valuable if unorthodox contribution to humanity. The way forward was to overcome prejudice by demonstrating to the rest of society their reasonableness and 'positivity'. Thus in comparison to the liberalism of the pacifists, fluffism is characterized by being not only fundamentally unconflictual, but also supposedly apolitical. (Its obvious incoherence could be sustained only because of the political inexperience of its young adherents, the extent to which its contradictions had not been exposed through the impact of external reality.)

Two things followed directly from this conception. Firstly, as the purpose of the campaign was to provide itself with a positive self-image, the representation became more important than that which was to be represented. Attracting media attention and getting 'positive coverage' became the be all and end all of the campaign as far as the fluffies were concerned. Indeed, were it possible to get positive TV coverage of a demonstration without the hassles and risks involved in actually having one, the fluffies would no doubt have done so. The fluffy is the situationist's nightmare come true, the rarefied thought of the post modernist personified - virtual politics.

Secondly, the fluffies were initially incapable of considering the possibility that they would not persuade the men in suits not to pass the bill. Unable to think in terms of building a *social movement* capable of defying the law, the failure of the campaign would represent the end rather than the beginning, and, as such, was a prospect that it was best not to think about less it sap the campaign's positivity. Many of the fluffies are too young to have not paid the Poll Tax. For them there are legally enshrined rights, or nothing.



### (iii) Latent contradictions in the campaign

There were a number of contradictions, some of which were immediately apparent from the start, and some which

remained latent for a while. These can be considered as operating on three main levels:

a) *Class struggle militants / liberals*: This opposition needs little explanation. Within the groups linked under the umbrella of the Freedom Network there were coherent and organized political elements like the Oxford Solidarity Action and Brighton Autonomists. And the national demonstrations were bound to attract elements seeking an opportunity to confront the state, veterans of Trafalgar Square and Welling. Anarchists and communists, aware of the contradiction inherent in proletarian subjects waging class war being represented by fluffies, were bound to try to help the campaign escape from its liberal strait-jacket. More interesting are the contradictions which became apparent within liberalism itself.

b) *Fluffy liberals / militant liberals*: The campaign was represented predominantly by fluffies seeking to demonstrate to the establishment their respectability. But those groups who would become a large part of the campaign's constituents were not involved in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the status quo, but precisely because they were involved in and wished to continue social struggles attempting to subvert it on some level. The fluffies were initially primarily concerned with the 'right to party', an activity which they reasoned they would be able to show posed no threat to the interests of the establishment once the latter understood it a little better. Hunt-sabs, anti-road protesters, squatters and to a lesser extent travellers, however, all shared a common opposition to those interests.

Thus the contradiction between the militant liberals and the fluffies was that of a political versus an apolitical outlook, a

collective oppositional approach versus an 'individual with contacts' media-oriented approach, and operated on the familiar level of the contradiction between subject and representation.

c) *Fluffy subjects / fluffy representation*: The media obsession of the fluffies meant that this contradiction between subject and representation was even felt within the ranks of the fluffies themselves. For the young raver types amongst them especially, the requirements of the campaign to present them as decent, reasonable members of society conflicted with their desire to drop out, smoke dope, take ecstasy, grow dreadlocks, dye their hair, pierce their faces and all the other things which do not fit with the media's idea of respectability. The need to appear respectable was a matter of self-denial, something which their ('new age') beliefs did not approve of; it contradicted their desire to be 'alternative', however depoliticized that lifestyle may be in comparison with that of the anarcho-punks or eco-warriors.

These three contradictions would come to the surface as the campaign became a movement. And as it became increasingly clear that, in contrast to old-fashioned leftist mediation, the fluffies would prove to be incapable of delivering anything in return for loyalty, this contradiction between subject and representation would become sharper. As it became clear that the only way forward would be to build a movement of mass defiance, this contradiction would become an openly visible rupture.

## (B) The Movement: Contradictions Manifested

A complete account of all the actions which took place as the campaign against the CJB gathered momentum is well beyond the scope of this article; far too much has happened over the last year to cover everything in detail. Local demonstrations have been organized all around the country, many of which have been the biggest seen in those towns for years, and some of them have been illegal, explicitly challenging the 1986 Public Order Act. The movement has thrown up squatted social spaces in Oxford, Blackburn, Hastings, Swansea, Brighton, Huddersfield, Cardiff, London, the Isle of Wight, Nottingham, Sheffield, Lewes and Rugby. There was the invasion and disruption of Hackney Council's meeting on the use of the CJB against squatters; this, like the Hackney Homeless Festival, ended in

clashes with the TSG. There was also the clash in Oxford when squatters occupied the lobby of the local nick to protest against their eviction. And there was a whole host of publicity stunts, lobbies, and media opportunities. All these events contributed to pushing the CJB to the top of the political agenda last year. The focus of this article, however, is on the contradiction within the movement between the political activities of class subversion and liberal lobbying, and this contradiction became most clearly manifest at two pivotal moments for the campaign: the national demonstrations in London on July 24th and October 9th last year.

### (i) The march to Downing Street:

a) *The 'Coalition': SWP jumps on the bandwagon, but can it steer it?*

The May 1st demonstration last year took the left by surprise. It demanded some kind of response, if not because it demonstrated the left's redundancy then because it provided a new wave of potential recruitment fodder. The SWP, with the keenest nose for an opportunity, and a more youthful rank and file than their main rivals, were first off the mark, setting up the 'Coalition Against the Criminal Justice Bill'. This comprised various groups such as the Advance Party, Freedom Network, the Hunt Saboteurs Association and an assortment of local anti-roads campaigns (notably the No M11 Link Campaign). But it was effectively dominated by the SWP given that these other groups were relatively inexperienced in the sordid business of political manipulation and were easily outmanoeuvred. The Coalition then called a national demonstration in London for July 24th, the weekend before the CJB was expected to become law.

This attempt at leftist recuperation demanded that the campaign be oriented towards the labour movement, and given the Labour Party's position on the CJB, this would have to be orientation towards the unions. SWP cadre became involved at

grass roots level, intervening in meetings of local groups, criticizing fluffyism by emphasizing the class nature of the attack, and arguing for the need to connect to other working class struggles. But any positive impact the SWP may have had on the movement was more than compensated for by the effects of its workerism, which only served to reinforce the appeal of liberalism within the movement.<sup>15</sup>

During the build up to the demonstration, the RMT called a series of 24 and 48 hour signal workers' strikes which paralysed the rail network. The SWP's repeatedly stated position was that it was necessary to forge links between the two struggles. Such links would theoretically have been desirable. Besides both being instances of class struggle, the signal workers' dispute and the anti-CJB movement were clearly linked by way of the anti-roads movement.

The prospect of connecting the struggles over transport (in a more meaningful way than the hoofs of tube drivers in Leytonstone being reciprocated by cheers from squatters in Claremont Road holding up the M11 link), the prospects of practical links between struggles forged through recognition of a



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common enemy in state and capital, was obviously one that would have been mutually beneficial.

Unfortunately, the signal workers' dispute offered no such opportunities as it was tightly controlled by the RMT as a signal workers' dispute and nothing more. Aside from a couple of arson attacks on signal boxes, there were no autonomous initiatives by the signal workers for others to support, and not even picket lines in many places. Under pressure from its left wing, the RMT executive agreed to call a national demonstration to support the 4,000 strikers, but did nothing to build it; only 1,500 turned up and about 90% of these were members of Trot groups. And the rally at the end of the march was exclusively for RMT signal workers. The dispute was sewn up by the RMT to such an extent that the making of links could only be rhetorical.

This did not dissuade the SWP, however. In part this was due to their willingness to carry the dead-weight of unionism, doing the donkey-work for the RMT executive whilst pleading for it to call an all-out strike or call out other railway workers.<sup>16</sup> But mainly it was due to their conception of the how the struggles were related.



Firstly, the SWP argued that the CJB was aimed primarily at striking workers (which is why it was a class issue), and the movement should therefore be defending its most important flank. Secondly, the link had to be made with the signal workers because, as a workplace struggle, it could succeed where the anti-CJB movement couldn't. Telling the main targets of the legislation that they were a mere smoke screen for the target that really mattered was bad enough, but telling them that they were effectively incapable of fighting it was an abject lesson in theoretical disempowerment:

*We need to turn our efforts towards the trade unions and workplaces - for two reasons. First because it is at work that most of the people threatened by the bill come together. Second, because it is at work that we have most power.*

(*'What We Think'*, *Socialist Worker*, July 23rd)

This was the SWP's underlying message to proletarians refusing to allow their lives to be subordinated to wage labour:

'you are powerless', (get a job!). Given the choice between a 'class line', subsuming the struggle to that of the signal workers, on the one hand and the 'Defend Diversity - Defend Dissent' slogan of Liberty on the other, it is not hard to see why the appeal of liberalism was reinforced by the SWP's workerism. Besides which, there is nothing like seeing a long line of leftist hacks holding their character armour up to their chests, all shouting 'this week's *Socialist Worker*...', to make you feel like reaffirming your individual autonomy. And for those who couldn't quite envisage the signal workers toppling the government before it had managed to pass the CJB, the naive optimism of the fluffies seemed more attractive than the obvious conclusions to be drawn about a movement which could have no workplace presence.

Nevertheless, until the signal workers dispute was finally settled, the SWP tried hard to win the heart and mind of the movement. Their main opponents in this battle for ideological hegemony were the fluffies, particularly their vanguard - the Freedom Network.

### b) Keep it Fluffy - Go to Jail!

The Freedom Network started out as a non-hierarchical network between groups co-ordinated through the 'Cool Tan' office in Brixton. Within a short period of time, however, the pressures arising from being the point of contact between the network on the one hand, and the media and liberal establishment (Liberty, Charter 88) on the other, led to the London co-ordinators becoming the voice of the network. As they came to accept the position of representing the movement, so their commitment to fluffysm - and to ensuring its hegemony over the movement - became an increasing problem.

Following the initial success of May 1st, the Freedom Network sought to maintain the momentum of the campaign, but virtually had to be tricked by the SWP into endorsing plans for the national demonstration on July 24th. In the meantime, they pressed ahead with their own plans for escalating the movement, resulting in Operation Emily and Operation Democracy RIP. Operation Emily<sup>17</sup> was considered a great success. Twenty or so people dressed up in Edwardian costumes and chained themselves to railings outside parliament



outnumbered by the watching journalists; and hey presto - as much media coverage as May 1st with 24,980 less potential trouble makers! Operation Democracy RIP was an even more sickening attempt to gain 'positive media coverage': a funeral procession as far from positing the death of democracy as the coffin-bearers were from comprehending that the content of democracy is the atomizing dictatorship of money.

The fluffies immersed themselves in the hard work of representation - the production of pathetic media spectacles, liaising with representatives of the liberal establishment, the press and other campaign groups, co-ordinating the flow of information etc. But an early sign that their ability to impose the politics of fluffiness could be threatened by those they sought to represent occurred at Twyford Down on July 2nd. Local fluffies organized a mass trespass of the M3 extension prior to its opening, and a couple of thousand people turned up, including other fluffies, eco-warriors, travellers and some lefties. But whilst its billing gave the impression that the organizers intended a confrontational exercise in direct action, they had in fact arranged for the trespass to be a largely symbolic affair culminating in a media stunt; an effigy burning for the benefit of invited journalists.

Many of the trespassers on the other hand had different ideas. The numbers there gave the crowd a subversive potential whose actualization had an irresistible appeal, and some small groups set about trying to trash the finished motorway (no easy task) by stuffing rocks down the drains, whilst others jumped up onto security vehicles. Most people were content at this stage to be simply trespassing, however, and continued to march up the hill, at the top of which the crowd would come to a standstill and be confronted with a choice of fundamental importance.

The organizers had halted the march, holding hands and dancing round to their irritating anthem 'we are the new people, we are the old people, we are the same people, stronger than before', attempting to offer a celebration of the crowd's potential as a sop for preventing its realization. They wanted the crowd to return the way it had come in order to conduct the spectacle of the effigy burning, and they certainly did not want the crowd to carry on down the other side of the hill where potential 'negative press' lay waiting to sabotage the occasion. In that direction stood a thin blue line of police and beyond it the A33, the congested artery the Down had been bisected to alleviate.

Decision time; a spectacular memorial to a defeated struggle by continuing to trespass on an unopened road that the police clearly did not give a shit about because little harm could be done,<sup>18</sup> or an easy confrontation with a clearly inadequate police presence in order to blockade the functioning road beyond it. Hampshire police had obviously been relying on the fluffy cops and the cops in people's heads, and once their arguments had been defeated it was relatively easy to breach their line. Again a long pause, as the assertion of collective power by blocking the road required someone confident enough that others would follow to step out in front of the traffic. But the realization that the road was the easiest way back to liquid refreshment meant that the plunge was taken and the best part of two thousand people piled onto the road. The feeling of collective empowerment, in stark contrast to the feeling of vulnerability felt by the individual pedestrian, was immense. The police were powerless to intervene as the crowd danced its way to Winchester to the rhythm of bongos, chants of 'kill the bill', 'no more roads' and the syncopated 'smash the Criminal Justice Bill'. Would the fluffies be able to contain such energy when 50,000 came together on the streets of London?

As the July 24th demonstration approached, the Freedom Network began to worry about 'their' mass spectacle being 'hijacked' in a similar way. Confused by its rhetoric, not understanding that they are sheep in wolf's clothing, they

thought the SWP was gearing up for a confrontation with the police, a scenario which had to be avoided at all costs for their 'respectability strategy' to have any chance of success.<sup>19</sup> So the Freedom Network decided to make sure the march would pass off uneventfully by providing fluffy stewards, 'Chill the Bill' placards, 'Non-Violence' stickers, and distribution on the day of the infamous 'Keep it Fluffy' leaflet.<sup>20</sup>

#### c) The 'Mob' Storms Downing Street

The tension between the SWP and Freedom Network became increasingly clear as the date of the demonstration approached. But this opposition between 'class politics' and 'fluffiness' is not the contradiction between class *struggle* and liberalism that we are concerned with. The opposition between Freedom Network and the SWP was primarily ideological, a struggle for representative hegemony. Both wanted the demonstration to be a media spectacle, but disagreed as to the particular nature of the image. Neither wanted to see the development of autonomous working class subjectivity that is a proletarian crowd realizing itself in confronting its enemy. Both these groups share a vision of social change which depends on 'the mob' being kept in check. And contrary to the sensationalist reports which appeared in the tabloid press, this development of collective subjectivity was successfully limited; there was no concerted attempt to storm Downing Street.

The coming together of 50,000 diverse proletarians in opposition to government legislation does encourage a sense of solidarity, and to that extent is a necessary step beyond the usual atomization of bourgeois society. But unless the crowd acts as a collective force, the development of collective subjectivity is limited. When the potential goes unrealized, when the crowd simply marches from A to B along an approved route in order to hear boring speeches before dispersing, the collectivity is little more than a collection of atoms, like an inert gas. It is when the crowd *acts* to impose its power on an external barrier that such atomization is overcome, releasing the energy of molecular bonding like the act of combustion. It must act against that which tries to keep it divided - capital and its state form - for its potential to be realized. And on July 24th that did not happen to a sufficient degree.

The SWP headed the march, proudly revelling in the thought of all those photographers capturing the image of copies of 'the paper' and Socialist Worker placards being brandished beneath the RMT banner. Some way behind this leftist contingent, a group of about a hundred or so stopped outside the gates of Downing Street, and perhaps a dozen of these attempted to either pull the gates down or climb over them. But this small section of the crowd remained relatively isolated from the main body of the march, which continued to file past. Indeed, had the ornamental gates actually given way this relatively small 'mob' would have been hammered by the riot police, a point later underlined when it was revealed in *The Observer* that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner had been prepared to authorize the use of plastic bullets, for the first time on mainland Britain, if the crowd had penetrated Downing Street.

That this section of the crowd was isolated was partly due to the 'fluffy stewards'. They, along with the police, encouraged the main body of the march to keep moving; some stewards took their ideological presuppositions to their logical conclusion by becoming 'pacifist police', not only remonstrating with those outside the gates but in some cases actually removing masks to expose faces to the security cameras! But the isolation of combatants was not primarily due to the hold of these fluffies on the march. Indeed no-one took the ridiculous advice of the 'Keep it Fluffy' leaflet to heart by holding hands around the 'trouble makers', let alone sitting down or adopt the 'doormat' tactic. In

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fact, most of the demonstration took neither the side of 'the mob' or of the 'pacifist police'; they simply remained spectators. They were not compelled to recognize themselves in either collective identity, neither the force of negation nor reaction. And whilst many in the crowd were sympathetic to some of the ideas of the fluffies, this decision not to join in was not so much a result of a firm commitment to all the practical implications of fluffy politics so much as the police tactics on the day.

There was little visible police presence on the march. The favourite targets of animal rights activists, McDonald's and Boots, had small numbers of police outside, but there were no riot police on view. Those in Whitehall were in withdrawn positions initially; there were none stationed outside the gates of Downing Street. There had obviously been a decision made to adopt a low profile in order not to provoke any trouble. When the gates began to give way the police sought to distract the crowd by making several limited forays from behind the gates on the opposite side of Whitehall, but having learnt the lessons of the Poll Tax riot took considerable care not to provoke the

rest of the march. After each foray, they retreated, allowing the march to continue, and leaving the would-be rioters with little alternative but to rejoin it.

The events of July 24th indicated that whilst many in the movement preferred the ideological appeal of liberalism to the dogma of Leninism, they had no commitment to the practical necessities of fluffysm. Nothing happened on the march to force it to realize its collective identity as a force of negation - no confrontation occurred that forced it to realize its class subjectivity. But there are two sides in this battle. The state was legislating against class autonomy, and, whether the movement recognized itself in class terms or not, if the movement continued in the direction of mass defiance of the law, and if that legislation was going to be imposed, the state would have to put on a show of force sooner or later. If it chose to attack the movement rather than back down, it could intimidate, divide and disperse it. But it could just as easily help to compose it as a force of working class subjectivity - it could provoke a riot!

### (ii) Hyde Park '94 - Stuff the Law!

#### a) Build up to the demonstration:

The Coalition called another demonstration for October 9th. Over the two months before the demonstration there were, however, significant changes affecting those competing for representative hegemony. The other groups in the Coalition effectively withdrew, pissed off at being continually outmanoeuvred, leaving the SWP in sole charge of the organization. But at the same time as the SWP found itself being handed the reins of the movement it was effectively withdrawing itself from it. The party had never felt comfortable operating on such relatively alien territory, a playing field better suited to anarchism than Leninism; and as they belatedly realized that the signal workers' dispute was going nowhere, the SWP found that it had nothing left to say, and has been struggling for direction ever since.

The fluffies on the other hand were having a field day, and not just because their main competitors were withdrawing their bid. The events at Downing Street had done their credibility no harm whatsoever. Only a small minority, who had been critical of them in the first place, knew how disgracefully the fluffy stewards had behaved, siding with the police against the movement.<sup>21</sup> The fluffies were in charge of the flow of information within the movement, and many non-fluffy liberals would side with the fluffies to the extent that they knew what had occurred.

But most of the movement did *not* know any of the details of the confrontation, having mostly found out about it through the extensive media coverage. And it was this fact, that the Downing Street clash had sparked off intense media interest in the movement, that put the fluffies in such a strong position. Throughout August and September the fluffies were in their element, giving interviews to the more liberal newspapers or lefty magazines like the *New Statesman*, appearing on radio chat shows, being invited to address meetings etc. The trouble outside Downing Street paradoxically gave a massive boost to the representative opportunities for the fluffies. They became media darlings.

Time was ticking away, however. The House of Lords mauled the bill somewhat, slowing down its passage, but the day it would be passed to the Queen for Royal Assent (unless

her humanity - beneath the crown etc. - led her to opt for a constitutional crisis instead) was drawing nearer. The hunt sabs were gearing up for confrontation once the fox-hunting season began again, and the No M11 protesters were getting ready for the big showdown at Claremont Road. Whilst the fluffies hared around getting 'good press' but going nowhere fast, the realization that confrontation with the forces of the state was going to be inevitable was gradually infusing the rest of the movement.

#### b) Ravers' revenge:

The atmosphere of the October 9th march was in many ways similar to that of the previous one; lots of percussion instruments and whistles, most people simply intent on enjoying themselves. The police on the other hand were more visible than before, with concentrations of riot cops tooled up along the route. And they would be needed.

Despite the fact that most of the crowd were not seeking a confrontation, their desire to have fun conflicted with the state's need to regulate that fun, and their determination to dance led to a confrontation prefiguring those posed by the legislation against unlicensed raves. The Coalition organizers had agreed with the police beforehand that music in the park would be limited. But would the crowd be content with speeches from boring and irrelevant liberals from the labour and civil liberties movement, welcoming the anti-CJB movement (in so far as they could recuperate it)?

Many didn't bother listening to them, grouping instead around small pockets of music. But these poxy rigs were clearly inadequate for a celebration of unity, for 100,000 or so demonstrators to dance together. The means of production for such a mass rave were arriving, however. Two lorries with sound systems on the back were bringing up the rear of the march, moving down Park Lane to Marble Arch, surrounded by a throng of bodies dancing in the sun. And they clearly intended to carry on into the park, in defiance of what the organizers had agreed (possibly for the all-night rave we had heard rumours about).

Having publicly stated that they were banned from the park the police had little alternative but to try to stop the sound systems at Marble Arch, blocking their progress with police vans.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps a riot could have been averted had they simply allowed the ban to be violated, but this approach carries with it inherent dangers as well, encouraging a lack of respect for the rule of law. If they weren't going to stop the sound systems at Marble Arch what would happen to the legislation against raves - would it be taken as a serious deterrent or mocked disdainfully? Where and when would a line be drawn saying 'thus far and no further'? As it turned out the police *did* have to let the sounds into the park. The dancing crowd did not bow to their authority and disperse, but grew as people in the park realized what was happening. A few missiles were thrown and riot police were deployed, along with horses. But the situation remained a stand-off; the dancing continued in the street, on the lorries, on bus shelters, and even on top of a police van. Faced

cops was not something which could be tolerated. And this time they came back in greater force. Units of police horses backed up by baton-wielding cops on foot charged into the park in an effort to disperse the crowd. But the crowd would simply scatter, and then regroup, and then charge back at the police.

Having defied the police over the sound systems a large body of the crowd had already developed a sense of unity. The park was their space, autonomous space. The dancing was a celebration of that collective autonomy, and the police intrusion was a violation of it. By charging the crowd the police only served to further undermine the atomization within it, and each time it refused to disperse it became less an aggregation of independent citizens and more a collective subject.

Proletarians who had been relatively uncritical of the fluffies, who had lobbied for rights, became composed as antagonistic working class subjectivity - defiant and determined to drive the police back out of the park. And this it did, by sheer



with such determination, and not wanting to provoke a major public order 'problem' given the size of the crowd, the police decided to back down. The lorries edged their way into the park and although people pulled crowd barriers into the road to guard its rear the police made no effort to provoke further trouble.

#### c) Riot! Riot! I Wanna Riot!

That despite this retreat the riot still happened was due to the moment of truth in the police's 'anarchist conspiracy' theory. While most of the crowd celebrated the sound system victory by partying, content to have got their music, a determined minority sought to push the situation further. Class War were no doubt off competing with the SWP and the other leftists in the paper-selling stakes, but some 'class warriors' were pelting police vans with missiles from inside the park. They could have been squatters or travellers angry that the outlawing of their lifestyles was imminent, or just veterans of past battles in Trafalgar Square with an intense hatred of the police. Or they could indeed have been anarchists or communists who reckoned the situation was ripe because the movement had discovered the important moment of truth in fluffy ideology - that beneath its air of invincibility the police force is just made up of individual human beings, strong as an organized collective force, weak in disorganized isolation, and far from invincible when faced with vastly superior numbers on a terrain not of its choosing.

Whatever, the police, seeing that it was only a tiny minority, chose to confront the missile throwers rather than pull back their vans. Their initial foray into the park was brief. The small deployment of police horses was insufficient to take on those who were attracted by the disturbance, and they were quickly driven from the park by a jubilant mob. But they came back into the park - public order had to be reasserted. Dancing was one thing, but trashing police vans and attacking mounted

weight of numbers. Weapons were scarce, although a few resourceful individuals showed great initiative in inventing ways to satisfy this newly produced need (empty tins filled with sand, smashed up park benches and litter bins for example). And a few individuals showed remarkable bravery in leading some of the attacks. But the overwhelming characteristic of the riot was the number of anti-CJB campaigners who showed class solidarity and, one for all and all for one, forced the police to retreat.

When the police were successfully driven out of the park, another stand-off ensued. The police were on one side of the railings and the rioters the other. The police were unable to come over the railings without getting hammered, and the crowd showed no desire to try either, content to use the railings as a traditional 'barricade', a boundary marking the autonomous zone it had reclaimed.

Dancing, smoking, drinking, watching the fire breathers; the atmosphere was unlike recent riot situations in that the territory the police wanted to retake was being held relatively easily and it was possible to gradually relax and enjoy the occasion. The 'inky dink' bicycle-powered sound system arrived to try to diffuse the crowd's joyous anger, but merely managed to provide audible accompaniment to the rebellious revelry under the trees.

And, with time to look around and reflect, identifying friends and familiar faces beneath hoods and masks, it became clear that this crowd was demonstrating that the contradiction between class war and liberalism was not simply one of different people, 'militants' and 'liberals', with different ideas. It was also one of proletarians who had reflected their relative atomization in their liberal arguments now reflecting the extent to which it had been overcome in the collective activity of rioting. Bourgeois ideology and the active negation of bourgeois



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society as dialectical opposites within the same individual subjectivity.

#### d) Reflection:

During the hangover which follows an intoxicating experience such as this it becomes easier to assess the limitations of what has been achieved. The riot has not swelled communist ranks by 100,000, nor did it transform the nature of the movement overnight.

For starters perhaps only 5 or 10% of the crowd actually took part in the riot. Not having experienced the riot themselves, those who had not taken part were far more vulnerable to the dominant competing interpretations of the events. And the rioters themselves dispersed to return to 'normal life',<sup>23</sup> albeit with a heightened awareness of the shallowness of its roles. After experiencing its active negation, returning to the reified world of bourgeois society is like finding oneself on the set of a soap opera where the other actors will not admit that they are playing cameo roles and are seemingly unaware that they could invent their own characters instead. As the memory fades the sense of separation from the cameo diminishes, and resignation to the boundaries of this stage set, where social connections are mediated by money but where the semblance of life contains certain guarantees, appears an easier option than continually trying to shake the other actors.

To the extent that a 'community riot' actually succeeds in creating a community, collective subjectivity may be preserved by the sharing of experiences and the desires they gave rise to.

The problem of decomposition is far greater following a riot like that in Hyde Park. Many combatants will have returned to 'communities' in which there is a greater awareness of the frustrations and aspirations of the inhabitants of Albert Square or Ramsey Street than of real neighbours.

The TV and newspapers will have screamed 'scum!' at them, repeating the police assertion that the riot was the result of deliberate manipulation by 'violent hate-mongers'. If they returned to a local anti-CJB group they were likely to have been outnumbered by non-combatants bemoaning the 'tragedy' of the riot, exchanging stories of how this or that 'innocent bystander' got truncheoned by the police. To the extent that our rioter finds him- or herself isolated in the face of this barrage, it becomes easier to cling to the explanation of the organizers<sup>24</sup> than to defend the class position that the riot was a good thing. Such logic is class logic, a collective logic, and its voice sounds strange when entering into arguments whose terms of reference are limited to the continued existence of bourgeois society.

Just as an individual subject may contradict his or her liberal ideology by developing working class subjectivity in collective struggle, so this process of class recomposition is subject to the counter-tendency of decomposition and fragmentation. The Hyde Park riot allowed a few more proletarians to glimpse the possibilities of the life of the truly social individual. But as these social individuals returned to the privations of bourgeois individuality, so the dominant ideas in the movement could reassert themselves.

### (iii) 'CIA Week': Meeting the Act Head On

Only ten days after the events at Hyde Park, a lobby of parliament organized by the Coalition was taken as another opportunity to confront the Met. A mini-riot ensued, with bottles and sticks thrown at the police, railings destroyed and fire-crackers used against police horses, before it was defused by a police withdrawal and Coalition stewards taking over from the absent fluffies. During the same period, there were also many opportunities for the fluffies to argue on the radio or TV shows like Kilroy that no, the legislation was not necessary (for some undefined but universally accepted 'common good').

Thus the development of working class subjectivity neither reached 'critical mass' nor was completely fragmented; the movement continued, and contained within it the same contradictions.

On the day the bill became an act, the No M11 Link Campaign organized a mass trespass of motorway construction sites, and the following day a publicity stunt on the roof of the houses of parliament: two actions which oscillated around the pivot rather than expressed the poles of the basic contradiction.

The No M11 Campaign were also involved with a number of other groups (hunt sabs, youth CND, Freedom Network and others) in organizing a week of actions, in and around London, designed to publicly defy the new act. The week was intended both to warn the authorities and to encourage potential targets of the legislation of our intention to intensify our activities rather than curtail them; it was hoped that, in the face of large numbers of people participating in each others campaign actions, the police would be reluctant to make arrests under the new act. Dubbed 'CIA (Criminal Injustice Act) week', most of the actions failed to achieve quite the participation or the co-operation between different groups that was hoped for. The highlight of the week was perhaps the trespass / rooftop demonstration of Michael Howard's new house in Kent, which combined clever direct action, taking the police completely by surprise, with publicity stunt. However, most of the actions that week can be considered successful in that the police were

largely unwilling to arrest people using the new laws when faced with mass defiance; clearly they did not want 'trouble' after their recent disastrous intervention at that other CJB/CIA demo at Hyde Park.

But whatever happened in 'CIA week', what really mattered was whether, after the initial fuss had died down, the movement would prove to have had any lasting effect in reinforcing the areas of autonomy and subversive struggles that needed to be defended against renewed assault, armed with more repressive legislation, by the state. Would the movement go forward with the same spirit of determination and resistance that characterized the intentions of those who wanted to meet the new act head on? Could the movement meet the challenge of continued resistance, or would the mundane reality of the act signal the decomposition of the movement?





## Part Three: Into The Void

### From Single Issue Campaign to Anti-Capitalist Movement?

#### (i) The Movement

Although the CJ&POA has only been law for 5 months now, and some sections of it have yet to be implemented, it seems fair to say that to a limited extent the movement *has* risen to the challenge; it has not crumbled in the face of the law. But there have been significant developments.

##### a) The 'Coalition':

The Coalition has organized two mass trespasses, at Chequers (the Prime Minister's residence in Buckinghamshire) and Windsor Castle, ostensibly to challenge clause 70 of the act against trespassory assembly. But unlike the trespass at Michael Howard's place, these have been pre-arranged with the full knowledge of the police; and with the SWP having done little to build them, even failing to mobilize significant numbers of its own cadre, there have been insufficient numbers to pose any real threat to the large contingents of police on standby.

SWP stewards have had some difficulty getting 'trespassers' to stick to public footpaths; at Chequers the SWP agreed with the police to proceed along the Ridgeway *footpath*, i.e. a public right of way, but were ignored by elements who mistakenly thought the whole point of the exercise was to *trespass*, thereby challenging the police to use the new law. But these stage-managed events have been at best publicity exercises, at worst little more than cynical recruitment exercises.

The Coalition is now little more than a classic front organization. With each event, more of the movement becomes disillusioned with it, with the result that each trespass or demonstration produces diminishing returns for the party. Another national demonstration cannot be ruled out, but it is equally likely that the SWP will disentangle itself from the movement completely in favour of involvement in one of the various public sector disputes which are looming, where they would be on a more comfortable terrain. The 'pressure the union leadership' position would find a more receptive audience amongst nurses, teachers or civil servants than road protesters and ravers, and the movement as a whole would lose one of its national foci.<sup>25</sup>

##### b) The Fluffies:

Meanwhile the fluffies have entered 'the void', the period after the passing of the law, the future which they had considered only in their dystopian nightmares where even family picnics would be broken up by marauding riot police. As they have done so, the latent contradiction within the fluffy tribe - identified earlier in terms of subject and representation - has come to the fore and is leading to something of a parting of ways.

There is rumoured to be a division within the Freedom Network, between those who see the struggle against the CJ&POA as essentially over, and who are arguing that attention should now be turned to the next civil rights lobby,<sup>26</sup> and those more attracted towards maintaining opposition by engaging in defiance of the law. And this division is confirmed to some extent at local level. The most anti-proletarian fluffies, those for whom there was less of a contradiction in presenting themselves as upright citizens, are now orienting themselves towards working with Liberty and Charter 88 or green reformism, and are becoming less relevant to the remainder of the movement.

Those fluffies who have rejected this approach have not done so because they have suddenly developed a critique of the right-on ideology of the liberal bourgeois establishment. Not surprisingly most remain uncritical of the strategy of challenging certain sections of the CJ&POA in the European Court of Human Rights or lobbying for a written constitution (remaining critical only of criticism itself).

But instinctively most fluffies are not prepared to dissolve the movement and wait for deliveries from on high. Despite arguing that we are all just individuals they have found themselves as part of a social movement and do not want to return to their previous atomization. As a result, many are taking their slogans of DIY more seriously at last.

For some, who are still obsessed with the media image, this has meant concentrating on self-media production like *Undercurrents*, an alternative video news service produced by 'Small World' (a non-profit making organization committed to supporting liberal campaign groups). The democratization of the image enabled by the camcorder revolution has created its own problems, and not just the security risks posed by cameras in situations of confrontation with the police. Even in situations where video evidence is more likely to be of use to the defence than the prosecution, such as on NVDA actions, the presence of cameras creates the feeling that even in the act of negation one is still playing a role on the stage set of reification, only producing an image of negation and not its substance. Others still are more interested in looking after the flow of information in order to create the impression of a dynamic movement at the expense of organizing direct action, a strange interpretation of the 'Deeds not Words' slogan that defines the group.

But the majority of Brighton's fluffies, who previously declared themselves apolitical and non-confrontational but were also more committed than some to an alternative lifestyle defined by opposition to dominant values, are now moving towards a commitment to direct action. They have remained with the movement by moving from a position of just lobbying for legal rights to one of defying the law as well: from playing the 'upright democratic citizens' card to engaging with the anti-roads movement's refusal of the democratic process.

And it is worthwhile reviewing further how far many of these people have come in moving towards the positions of militant liberalism. When the campaign started up, it was the first engagement in any form of political activity for many, and early meetings would often be plagued by the mysticism that some of the 'alternative ravers' brought along with them from the scene. There would be proposals to chant 'Om' together on the beach to increase the psychic energy of the group, reports that mediums had been consulted to ensure 'the spirits' would be on side, and reassurances that the 'little people' were behind us. But involvement in even a limited campaign rapidly demonstrated the inadequacy of these ideas, as just organizing a picnic or benefit gig necessitated a level of collaboration between humans that exposed the limits of the spiritual world.

The fluffy ideology may not be considered that much of an advance, but despite it many people helped to organize political demonstrations or open squats for the first time. In doing so they have slowly begun to move from a definition of 'alternative' in terms of *ideas*, to one defined through *activity*; negatively by the

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refusal of work, and positively by involvement in an oppositional movement. They have been exposed to the arguments of more experienced squatters, environmental activists, leftists and even communists. And now that the CJB has become law, fluffy ideology is itself being transformed somewhat as the fluffies embrace overtly political actions. The commitment to non-violence is maintained, but even this becomes less absolute in the face of state brutality.

### c) Dispersal?

The extent to which it is possible to speak of 'a movement' as opposed to 'the movements' is a function of the extent to which those struggles are linked, not just by virtue of having been legislated against, but by interconnections through which both information and people flow. The Coalition is both unintended in and incapable of performing the role of national co-ordination, and it would seem that the Freedom Network are disengaging themselves from the movement.

Filling the vacuum is the *SchNews* team in Brighton's 'Justice?' (sic) group which receives information from other local groups as well as the Advance Party, Road Alert, Hunt

Saboteurs Association and others, producing a weekly news-sheet for national distribution which details the latest from the various struggles.<sup>27</sup> From this information, it is clear that whilst the movement has gone into decline in some places, local anti-CJB groups are still going strong where they are - or have been - more closely connected to the various struggles attacked by the CI&POA.

Those groups such as Brighton which set up squatted social centres seem to have benefited both from the number of people such centres brought into the orbit of the movement and the unifying effect that resisting evictions ultimately had. In certain places, proximity to anti-roads protests has allowed momentum to be maintained; similarly, in Cardiff, the opposition to the Cardiff Bay barrage development has provided a focus for consolidation.

Thus given that the movement as a whole is now little more than the sum of its interconnected parts we must now interrogate them in turn.

## **(ii) The Movements**

### a) Squatting Movement:

At the time of writing, not all of the anti-squatting provisions of the act have been implemented. But the 'protest squats' the movement has thrown up give some hope that squatting in this country could develop in the direction of the continental squatting scene.

Squats in much of continental Europe have not had the legal protection enjoyed by squats in this country under the 1977 Criminal Law Act. As a result, their survival has depended on their ability to defy the law by force, either being heavily fortified with squatters well armed to contest the eviction, or by having sufficient local support which can be mobilized onto the streets to pose a public order headache for the authorities. European squatters have therefore had to be more organized and politicized than British squatters, who have tended to rely on their legal rights. But, as these rights are removed, squatters in Britain will have to overcome their fragmentation and recompose themselves as a social force if they are to continue to squat. If this is to happen, squatted social centres will play a crucial role. If squatters choose not to coalesce in mass residential squats, for understandable reasons, then social spaces where they can connect and organize anti-bailiff solidarity will become essential.

The squatted social centres thrown up by the movement have had both similarities and differences to the social centres which provide the basis for autonomous organization in places like Italy. They have been characterized by expressing the contradictions inherent in the movement. The Courthouse squat in Brighton fell between the stools of a centre for a 'community of struggle' and a 'community arts centre', as it was forced both to meet the needs of the movement's participants and satisfy the obsession with gaining positive representation.

Overtly political activities - like workshops held on the continental squatting movement, prisoner support and contradictions in the anti-roads movement, and meetings to discuss the groups activities and direction - competed for space with poetry readings, Tai Chi, massage, cinema, drumming workshops and art displays etc. But this division was at least an expression of the differing needs of the movement. The publicity stunt with Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes appearing as a prosecution witness in a mock trial of the government, the 'no drink or drugs policy' (which no-one observed), and the argument against resisting the eviction, are

just three out of many instances which demonstrated the extent to which, for the sake of representation, the fluffies tried to present an image which contradicted their own needs.

The eviction of the Courthouse was resisted, however, if only to the extent of using barricades and sealing off the roof area in order to slow the bailiffs down. But given the previous fragmentation of the squatting scene this is at least a start, and there has been other bailiff resistance since then. This repositioning could continue if it is not undermined by the idea, held by some fluffies and reinforced by both police statements and press coverage, of a difference between 'good squatters' (who are 'creative', middle class, and do up the buildings they squat) and 'bad squatters' (who aren't and don't). But, importantly, many of the participants, through their involvement in the squat, have developed both a need for space free from the clutches of capital - where they can socialize without it being subordinated to organized leisure entailing mass consumption of some commodity or another - and the beginnings of a recognition of what it is that stands between them and the fulfilment of that need: the organized power of the state.

Far from having crushed squatting, the CI&POA may have breathed new life into the movement which, by refusing to allow basic human needs to be subordinated to the power of money, prefigures the day when everyone will be able to live in their own cathedral.

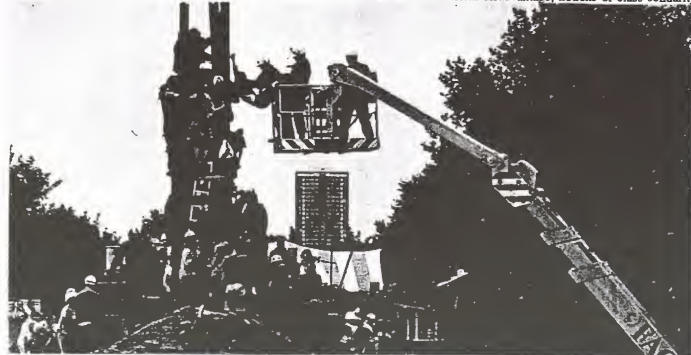
### b) Anti-Roads Movement:

By leafleting the national demonstrations and encouraging people to come to parties afterwards, the No M11 Link Campaign was able to draw significant numbers to the showdown at Claremont Road. By the time the law was passed in late October, the campaign was centred on defending this squatted street from the Department of Transport. In preparation for the eviction, rooftop towers and walkways were constructed, along with tree houses and street barricades cleverly disguised as works of art and thus blending in with the explosion of colour and creativity which made this car-free street such an island in the grey sea of east London.

The urban setting of this campaign, dealing with the impact of road building on daily life (housing, health and the human environment) meant that it became *relatively* unopposed by the Donga-style mysticism which so afflicted the Twyford Down

campaign. The resistance to the eviction of Claremont Road was easily the high point of the anti-roads movement to date. It took the state 4 days to retake the street in an operation which cost £2 million and involved over 700 police with dozens of bailiffs and security guards. The tactics of withdrawing to rooftops or 'locking on' in vulnerable positions are not without limits, however. Whilst the whole eviction may have taken 4 days, the police managed to retake the actual tarmac and pavement in little over an hour. This left people cut off inside squats, in tree houses and on the main tower in siege conditions, many with insufficient food and water or warm clothing and, after a while, no electricity. Such conditions breed the martyrdom syndrome, with divisions and recriminations as a result.

While the eviction of Claremont Road was not actually prevented, the effects of the resistance - on top of more than a year of direct action against the building of the link road - need to be judged in the wider context of the government's roads programme as a whole. The costs of this eviction, and of the security as a whole over the past year (reported to be £6 million), will have a bearing on future road building schemes. Projections to be fed into the Department of Transport's cost-benefit analyses and contractors' bids will be affected, and schemes where the economic advantages are at present marginal could therefore be shelved.



But the most important point, for this article anyway, is the fact that the state was unwilling to use those provisions of the CJ&POA which were explicitly drafted with road protesters in mind. None of the 'aggravated trespassers' were even arrested let alone charged under the act; neither was the new offence of trespassory assembly evoked. The scale of the resistance, in combination with its timing, occurring so soon after the Hyde Park riot, seems to have produced a recognition that using the CJ&POA could have created more problems than it was designed to solve.

But this raises the question as to who actually made this decision: simply referring to a retreat by the state glosses over the fact that, despite cross-party support in parliament, the state is far from united over the act. The police, and screws for that matter, hate 'their boss' Michael Howard. Indeed, there are a number of reasons for this division opening up within the state between the police and parliament. Firstly, by making previously civil offences into criminal ones, the workload of the police could be significantly increased; this, at a time when many forces are facing Treasury driven cutbacks, means an

unwelcome intensification of work. Secondly, and particularly following the Hyde Park riot, the police recognize that the legislation could force them into more situations of conflict, both exposing them to more risks and increasing resentment of them. In short, the police see much of this legislation as serving the self-interests of the government whilst leaving them to pay the price. Given this, it may be more accurate to say that it was police discretion which meant that the law was not used at Claremont Road.

In the last issue of *Aufheben*, we devoted considerable attention to the contradiction between the class struggle against roads and the liberal ideology held by many of its participants. Although some of the most active elements in the No M11 Link Campaign did have a critique of capitalism and democracy, for many in the campaign a recognition of the objective basis of the campaign was still sorely lacking. It is vital to recognize how ideas and practice are related, however, in order to grasp how the development of an anti-capitalist perspective may emerge. There was a degree of local support for the No M11 Campaign, especially at certain times when the struggle was in 'Wanstead, less so as it shifted into Leytonstone. But more often than not, protesters would invade construction sites to find themselves outnumbered by potentially violent security guards. In this situation of numerical disadvantage, notions of class solidarity

count for little. Playing the game of non-violence and hoping the rules are respected by the opposition seemed the best way of escaping a good kicking. The appeal for police to 'do their job even handedly' by protecting your 'right to protest', is at least in part a result of the weakness of the movement in relation to the violence of the road builders' protectors. Unfortunately the tactic of non-violence tends to encourage the adoption of a *principled pacifism*, to the detriment of an analysis in terms of class warfare.

This relation with security guards is becoming inverted in the campaign against the proposed M77 through Pollok Park in Glasgow. An unprecedented degree of local opposition to the scheme, and support for the 'outside' protesters, whose ranks are regularly swelled by local kids bunking off school, has meant that conditions no longer lend themselves so easily to appealing for the unwritten rules of non-violence to be observed on each side. Pictures of security guards have menacingly been posted up around the local estate, and they have been warned in no uncertain terms that there will be severe repercussions if they beat up any protesters. In the face of this intimidation, finding



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the boot on the other foot for a change, and being charged with siding with the yuppies against their own class,<sup>28</sup> many security guards have quit, including 24 on one day alone. In these circumstances, the limitations of non-violence as a principle should be more clearly exposed, and the development of an anti-capitalist perspective *may* be encouraged. The recent spate of arson attacks in other parts of Glasgow on the show homes of the main contractors, Wimpey, is a sign that things could be moving in the right direction.

The CJ&POA, far from crushing the anti-roads movement, has swelled its ranks. Not only has involvement in the anti-CJB movement led to a degree of further politicization, as anti-roads protesters have faced new questions and arguments arising from events like the Hyde Park riot, but the conditions for this movement becoming conscious of itself as class struggle are becoming more fertile as well. As it begins to do so, it prefigures the day when transport will no longer serve the requirements of the circulation of commodities, and people as commodities, but will be a function of enriched human needs and desires.

### c) Hunt Saboteurs Movement

Hunt sabs have, in the main, been reluctant to become involved with the movement. Those that have engaged with it have, because of their emphasis on direct action and lack of hang ups about violence, been useful allies against the fluffies at various junctures, and have themselves become politicized. This politicization has been a result of their engagement with other struggles, and this engagement has only been possible to the extent that these hunt sabs have left the ideological baggage of 'animal rights' behind them. It is necessary to examine this particular brand of militant liberalism in order to understand both why many hunt sabs have not become involved with the movement, and why those that have can appear better but in some ways be worse than the fluffies.

Militant liberalism looks at the world in terms of individuals and their morality. Militant liberals experience the horrors of capitalism more sharply than other (middle class) liberals, but unlike revolutionaries project these horrors onto particular manifestations of 'evil', which it is a moral imperative for individuals to confront. Thus militant liberalism has a certain appeal to activists seeking to save 'the planet' (good) from the (evil) 'road monster', for example. Many road protesters confront those protecting and carrying out road construction work with the argument that they should be ashamed of themselves for having made the wrong moral choice; they confront non-participants, seen as abdicating their moral responsibility, with the guilt trip of the morally pure and innocent unborn child: 'what did you do in the eco-war, daddy?'. But there is an important difference between the militant liberalism of the roads protester and the hunt saboteur, in that the very activity of road sabotage can lead to the transcendence of liberalism because it is essentially a struggle against capital. As it is objectively a form of class struggle, it carries within the possibility of being recognized as such. Hunt sabotage, on the other hand, does not, as it is purely a moral question. Fox hunting is not an imperative of capital but a mere tradition, and sabbing in itself therefore leads nowhere. The most logical development in the ideology of the hunt saboteur is from fox = good / hunters = bad, to animals = good / animal 'exploiters' = bad; the ideology of animal liberationism.

Animal liberation ideology is best understood in terms of its relation to the humanistic liberalism of the peace movement, in many ways its precursor. Again we find that, in contrast to the activities of the hunt saboteur, the activities of the NVDA wing of the peace movement were an expression of opposition to capital's imperatives (for the militarization of the state form)

and thus open to development in an anti-capitalist direction. But the most important contrast between the militant liberalism of the pacifists and that of the hunt saboteurs is that the world view of animal liberationism is an inversion of this humanistic liberalism.

For the peace movement, the individual was seen as basically good, and thus humanity was basically good, and this was counterposed to the evil of nuclear weapons which threatened humanity's destruction. For the animal liberationist on the other hand, it is not humanity which is good or innocent, but animals. Humanity (excepting the vegans) is therefore seen as the evil in this case. Humanity 'exploits' animals for its own ends, and each individual is implicated in this crime of humanity by eating meat or drinking milk and allowing it to happen.<sup>29</sup> Thus whilst the *humanistic liberalism* of the peace movement would have made it contradictory to use violence against other human individuals, those hunt saboteurs who cling to an *anti-humanistic liberalism* find that violence is perfectly compatible with their ideology. And it is not surprising that most hunt sabs have not wanted to become involved in a movement in which many individuals have not purged themselves of this crime of humanity.

Thus whilst other liberals in the movement may be able to move beyond their liberal perspectives because they are fighting for themselves, even if in a distorted/projected form, and are involved in the development of class solidarity, hunt saboteurs, to the extent that they confine themselves to the orbit of animal liberationism, projecting the horrors of capitalism away from themselves *absolutely*, can never move beyond the discourse of 'rights'.<sup>30</sup> Animals can never play a part in class recomposition, no matter how much animal liberationists anthropomorphize them to justify giving them 'rights'. Unlike other groups *demanding* rights, animals cannot develop proletarian solidarity; they can only be *granted* 'rights'.

But the possibility does still exist of hunt saboteurs seeking solidarity from others in the movement (rather than animals), thereby opening up the possibility of the development of a class perspective.

Apart from the recent live export protests, hunt sabotage is the most open and collective of animal rights activities. Sabs who are less committed to the ideological baggage of the puritanical self-sacrificing vegan may be slagged off, but are not completely excluded. Many sabs hold contradictory ideas, just as they did when hunt sabbing was popular amongst anarcho-punks in the 1980s until the miners' and printers' disputes resolved such contradictions one way or the other. And it is likely that developments will occur in the hunt saboteurs' movement, in the face of increased repression, that will expose some of these contradictions.

The discretion the CJ&POA gives to the police has meant that, in contrast to the anti-roads movement, the law has been extensively deployed by the police against hunt sabs; there is little chance of repercussions in the countryside. Hunt sabs have undoubtedly borne the brunt of the legislation to date. But those sabs more committed than others to a militant liberal ideology are unlikely to seek solidarity from the movement. Two opposing tendencies offer themselves as ways out of this repression for those who choose to continue to prioritize the end of fox hunting.

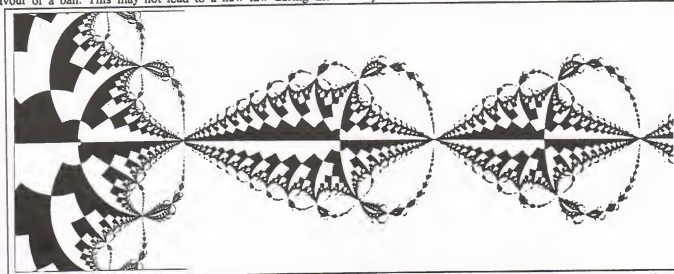
On the one hand there is the inherent tendency towards guerrilla activity. For many of the most committed animal rights activists, hunt sabbing is seen as a relatively ineffective activity suitable mainly for education and recruitment purposes, spotting those who might best graduate to Animal Liberation Front activity. Thus one possible response to the pressures on hunt sabbing may be the development of more covert attacks on hunt vehicles and kennels etc., at present the fringe activities of

groups like the Hunt Retribution Squad and the Justice Department which emerged as repression and violence increased in the late 1980s.

On the other hand there is the tendency towards the lobbying tactics of the League Against Cruel Sports and the RSPCA. The banning of hunting by parliament can no longer be seen as an impossibility given the recent commons majority in favour of a ban. This may not lead to a new law during the

result from a mere change in ways of thinking, but can only be the result of the revolutionary transformation of social relations.

The unity of a rave is illusory to the extent that ravers remain alienated from each other. We remain alienated from each other because we are alienated from ourselves; our subjectivity is stolen from us by capital and returns to confront us as a hostile power, the dull compulsion of the economy. The unity of a rave is an illusion because ravers still carry their



lifetime of this parliament, but should Labour win the next election a ban is certainly likely. Despite the Hunt Saboteurs Association's commitment to direct action, the movement does contain its less militant and more democratic wing, usually in charge of the movement's representation. A leaflet the HSA put out on the July 24th national demonstration must have made many hunt sabs cringe, stating: 'We believe that police officers should be allowed to do what they joined the force to do - catch criminals and try and make this country a better, safer place to live...'

Either of these tendencies would remove hunt saboteurs even further from the class struggle. In contradistinction to our hopes for the anti-roads movement or squatting, there is little hope for a favourable resolution of contradictions in this particular movement at present.

#### 4) Rave New World:

Our previous statement that the rave offers only an *illusion* of unity requires qualification in the light of experience. Quite clearly, the crowd at a rave shares something which is missing in a cinema audience or a crowd in a shopping centre. It is necessary to examine the nature of the illusion. The illusion of unity derives from the shared transformation in consciousness that occurs during a rave. This is brought about largely by the empathic intoxication induced by ecstasy, and moving as one to the same beat. It is this consciousness-shift that becomes mystified as 'recovering the lost consciousness of the tribe'. And it is celebrated in lyrics which promote the idea that freedom results from a mere change in attitude, a 'revolution of consciousness' as it has been called.

Supposedly a better world can be created if we think about each other in a more loving way. And for the DIY idealist, the rave is the beginning of the transformation of this alienated world, a process to be continued by 'being in touch with ones feelings' even when not intoxicated (substituting the drug of eastern religion for orthodox narcotics) and being generously disposed to others, hugging them even after the empathic effects of ecstasy have worn off.

But alienation is not just a question of consciousness. It describes the social relations which give rise to specific forms of consciousness: the process of reification. Thus freedom cannot

social bonds with each other in their pockets in the form of money. Social relations remain mediated by exchange, reified as the economy, external to us and out of our control.

But if this unity is illusory only to the extent that capitalist social relations keep ravers essentially alienated from each other, then to the extent that those relations are subverted through forming relations of collective struggle, the unity is no longer illusory but becomes real. If ravers create relations which are direct, immediate and visible, then the celebration of unity is qualitatively different. The raves which have occurred after demonstrations against the CJB were celebrations of a real if limited overcoming of bourgeois atomization, attempts to preserve a real collective unity experienced for the first time by many. And in Hyde Park, the unity celebrated by the dancers confronting the riot police was similarly no longer illusory. Could these ravers come to recognize that the 'revolution of consciousness' is inseparable from the transformation of material reality? Could they become dialecticians?

A summer of class conflict between ravers and the police would dwarf the significance of events like Claremont Road. Unlicensed raves may have declined in recent years but, sufficiently well organized, would still attract huge numbers of proletarians in defiance of the law. There are literally millions more ravers than road protesters, and dealing with only a fraction of these would cause the police major problems. But it is not just the quantitative dimensions of such potential conflicts that makes them such qualitatively important prospects.

Raves are on the whole the least politicized of the activities targeted by the CJ&POA, but ravers are potentially in the best position to see the capital relation behind the actions of the state. The legislation against raves is an attempt to further subordinate them to the commodity form and reintegrate them into the mainstream circuits of capital where they can be regulated and subject to taxation. Many ravers who have become involved in the movement have little understanding as to why they are being picked on so unfairly. The Advance Party cannot help them as it cannot criticize the commodity form. But as the more money-oriented rave organizers tend towards further acceptance of the constraints of commercialism, rather than risk having their 'constant capital' seized and confiscated by the police, the divisions within the rave scene may become more sharply focused.

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Clearly much depends on how those with the means to put raves on respond to the act this summer. There has been a degree of organization emerging amongst those sound systems who have put free raves on in the past, so it is possible that the commercial pressures may be resisted. But there are also signs that such resistance may not lead to the open antagonism that offers such potential for a hot summer of class struggle. There are signs that such antagonism may be mediated, as has been the case in Luton with the Exodus collective.<sup>31</sup>

Exodus have been putting on free raves around Hertfordshire since 1992 and have faced extensive police harassment. But in doing so they have also built up a lot of support in the area. Thus when the police arrested 52 party goers and organizers, seizing their equipment, an angry crowd of 4,000 ravers descended on Luton police station to demand their release. Bottles were thrown; and the 150 police inside the station, fearing an outbreak of proletarian-style justice, turned to Exodus for help in policing the crowd. Exodus defused the crowd's legitimate anger and negotiated with the police for the release of the prisoners and the return of the confiscated equipment. When an agreement had been reached Exodus in turn told the crowd to disperse and go home.

By demonstrating their ability to mediate, policing the power of ravers in return for concessions from the police, Exodus now find themselves in a position where the police are no longer trying to crush them but want to work with them

The CJ&POA is an article of legislation which addresses us as individuals equal before the impartiality of the law. The 'right to silence' can no longer be used by either a shoplifter or Michael Howard. The Queen can no more party in my back yard without my permission than I can in hers. And the directors of Tarmac or Wimpey can no more stop me going about my lawful business on my own property than I can them on theirs. Are these ironies lost on those who continue to represent the movement in terms of 'civil rights', or do they believe such *class inequalities* can be cured by their progressive furtherance?

As individuals, we are protected by rights. The fundamental right from which all others are derived is the right of private property. Bourgeois society has in most countries abolished the slavery whereby I may be taken against my will as the property of another. I am an equal to others, free to dispose of my private property as I please; if someone else wants what is mine, the law says they cannot take it forcibly but must buy it. But what have I to sell? Only my capacity to labour. Thus the social relation of private property becomes on the one hand those with the means to satisfy labour and on the other those who must sell their labour to them. The essence of private property is laid bare, not as ownership, but exclusion:

*Proletariat and wealth are opposites; as such they form a single whole. They are both forms of the world of private property... The proletariat ... is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, the condition of its existence, what makes it the proletariat, i.e. private property. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in its self-alienation; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence.*

(Karl Marx, The Holy Family)

No amount of rights can compensate for the absolute poverty of the proletarian condition. The world of rights is founded upon our alienation. Rights define, not freedom, but its limits. Real freedom can only come about through the dissolution of this world of rights, the restoration of our creative

instead. The CJ&POA clauses concerning raves give discretionary powers to the police, who may therefore allow 'responsible' groups like Exodus to put on free raves while cracking down on easier or more dangerous targets. The development of open antagonism could therefore be undermined by such mediation.

The continuation of free raves would represent a victory of sorts, but as with those delivered by old fashioned social democratic mediation, it will have been at a price. Consider the plans announced by Exodus after the Hyde Park riot for a demonstration in London some time this spring involving sound systems from up and down the country pledged to non-violence, with microphones on all the floats to help control the crowd.<sup>32</sup> We can speculate that, having experienced the wrath of the Hyde Park rioters, the police would give in to the demands for music, and in return Exodus would no doubt strive to ensure no-one rocks the stitched up boat. Ravers could get what many fought for last year without having to fight again. But the legitimacy of the state would have been reinforced by such a negotiated 'freedom to party'.

The deliverance of such freedoms by these new recuperators may serve to undermine a challenge to the guarantors of the condition of unfreedom, unless ravers too, through their involvement in the movement, have developed a need for the kind of freedom that can not be given, but must be taken.

## Conclusions

capacities unto ourselves in a world where the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all. Communism abolishes rights in favour of free determination, the production first and foremost of ourselves as social individuals with richly developed needs and desires. The lobby for rights on the other hand serves to maintain this stinking rotten world of work and duty, unfreedom and poverty.

The negation of bourgeois society exists in the process of becoming, however. It must be discovered in the tendencies of the here and now. And despite the language of the movement which has emerged in opposition to the CJB, if we care to scratch its surface we can find that it contains within it tendencies which posit the dissolution of this alienated world of rights. It exists in the road protesters' refusal of democracy, the squatters' refusal of property rights, and the ravers' pursuit of autonomy. It is expressed by the self-organization of the movement, and found its highest point in the Hyde Park riot.

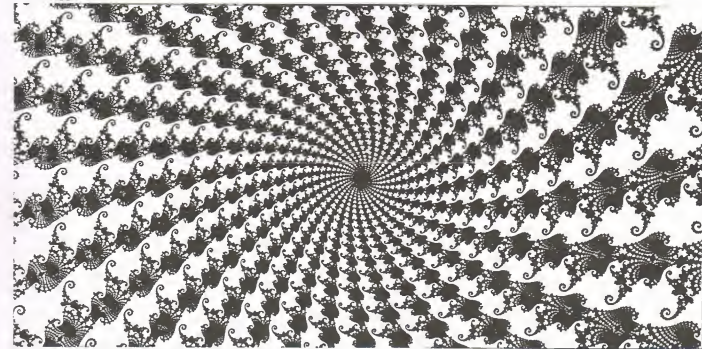
We have to look at the possibility of these tendencies articulating themselves as a self-conscious anti-capitalist movement. Such a possibility is not just an abstract or utopian one, but one posited by the movement itself. The CJ&POA has brought previously separate phenomena into a relation with one another and has resulted in a degree of cross-fertilization between struggles. As it has done so, it has raised the question amongst some participants of how these struggles are related. Thus it has opened up the possibility of the recognition of the *general* (capital-in-general) that exists in and through the *particular* (the road industry, music industry, farming industry, property developers, police force).

The possibility exists of the recognition of the enemy as the differential unity of capital, and thus its negation no longer in terms of separate groups but in terms of their connection as the differential unity comprising the universal class that is the proletariat.

Such a development of working class subjectivity is inseparable from the political recomposition of the class. Further decomposition could see these tendencies smothered even deeper under the blanket of liberalism. In the present



context, the development of a struggle against the Job Seekers Allowance, which poses a threat to social reproduction on the dole which is the basis for most of these struggles and lifestyles, could be an important step towards a better understanding of the class nature of bourgeois society. In the long term, it will depend on making links with the struggles of the rest of the class, a possibility which is posed by the state's need to move beyond attacking the marginalized sections of the working class to attack the entrenchment of the remainder. The development of class consciousness is inseparable from the experience of class struggle.



An undialectical approach to this question is insufficient, however. The relationship between consciousness and being is not one way, and an approach which conceives of it as such can only be a repetition of, or an inversion of, the misconceptions of Lenin. Human activity is conscious activity. People do not function automatically only to think about what they have done afterwards. They also think about what to do beforehand. What the anti-CJ&POA movement does reflects the different ideas of its protagonists on how to proceed. *Ideas* are important.

The liberal establishment has an influence on the ideas of the movement. It offers ideas which guide the movement in the opposite direction to emancipation. Groups like Liberty and Charter 88 are not seen as having a political agenda, because agendas are proposals for change and these groups are fundamentally in favour of the status quo. They aim for the perfection of the bourgeois state, its correspondence with the democratic ideal. Comfortable in their alienation these professionals who advocate legal reform do not recognize the fundamental antagonism within this society, an antagonism that means that their dreams will never be fulfilled because the exploited class will always have a tendency to disobey the rules of the democratic game. But many in the movement, whilst unaware of the real meaning of the liberal establishment's agenda, are not insulated from the harsh realities of capitalism by the wealth and status that come with a professional role. Many in the movement have nothing to lose but their illusions that they have something to gain by conforming. Their positions as marginals in class society means that, whether the prospect is appealing or not, for many the future holds nothing but confrontation. In these circumstances revolutionary ideas can play a role.

Have revolutionaries responded adequately to the questions posed by the struggle? Have they helped the self-formation of the working class through their praxis? Let the reader be the

judge. What is certain is that the theory and practice of many revolutionaries were forged in relation to the left during a bygone era, defending proletarian autonomy against its recuperative tentacles. But as the world about us changes, so theory and practice must develop. Revolutionaries need to theorize the new conditions of struggle which are emerging, conditions which have given this movement its unique character. If we don't we will be consigned to the museum of revolutionary *ideology*. This article is a contribution to that process of *Aufhebung*.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 'EMUs in the Class War' in *Aufheben* 1. The post-war boom was based on the Keynesian settlement. Governments' role was that of inflationary demand management, the stimulation of demand through deficit financing, i.e. state expenditure based on credit. The channelling of monetary claims on future surplus-value on an unprecedented scale underpinned the guarantee of full-employment growth and relatively generous social welfare programmes. The price paid by the working class in exchange for the social wage of health care, housing provision, education and social security was acceptance of the Fordist deal, entailing the surrender of control over production. The settlement was premised on the expanded reproduction of relative surplus-value, which allowed for rising wages alongside increased profits. An ever increasing rate of exploitation (the ratio of surplus to necessary labour) was the key to the expanded reproduction of capital which allowed credit to function as boom-lending. The accumulation of productive capital formed the basis for the accumulation of money capital. The centre of Keynesian demand management was the regulation of the international flow of capital through the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, the regulation of international deficit financing of demand on the world market on the basis of an inflationary supply of dollars from the dominant US economy to the rest of the world. By 1973, however, the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 was in tatters.

By the mid-1960s the growth in world trade had brought with it a rapid expansion in the circuits of international money capital and the development of global capital markets. The development of the Euro-dollar markets in particular, which traded on dollars which had previously been repatriated in exchange for US-produced commodities, signalled that the institutional arrangements which had constrained the international flow of money capital to the national accumulation of productive capital were becoming strained. But it was the struggles of the new generation of post-war proletarians that led the strain to become a breach. Working class aspirations had to be integrated into the economy through wage concessions and increased public spending. The increased costs of 'demand management' only served to worsen the ratio of surplus to necessary labour, thus fuelling the costs of productive investment. And as profits were squeezed, capital not only

sought to borrow more money to make up for falling profits, but increasingly tended to place earned profits on the money markets. Thus as the post-war boom began to slide into recession, depressed rates of productive accumulation coincided with rapid monetary accumulation as boom-lending gave way to the recycling of credit, the speculative deferral of capital liquidation, which prevents the collapse of productive activity but keeps it going on an ever more fictitious basis. The oil price hike of 1973 gave a massive boost to the relative autonomy of money capital by liquidating and diverting huge sums of capital away from industrial capital into the coffers of the international banking system.

This uncoupling of the different forms of capital is what we have described as the new global reality of international finance capital. The abandonment of fixed exchange rates established an unregulated market for currency speculation which has imposed monetary discipline over the national organization of money. Speculative movements against the currency of nation-states perceived to be weak (as signified by the accumulation of public debt, balance of payment problems, high inflation etc.) diverts money capital away from those states, undermining the integration of their domestic economy into the world market, and forcing their governments to change their policy directions. Thus, state policies are subordinated to the flow of money capital in international financial markets. This fact was brought home to the British state by the sterling crisis of 1976, which led to the Labour Government borrowing from the IMF and promising to step up its austerity drive. We will return to this question of the retreat of social democracy in a future issue.

<sup>2</sup> A useful account of the extent to which monetarism has failed to deliver on its promises can be unearthed from the unfortunate academic waffle in Werner Bonefeld's *The Recomposition of the British State During the 1980s*, Dartmouth Publishing, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> A good example being 'Anarchism in the Thatcher Years', in *Socialism From Below*, Vol. 1 no. 1, July 1989. This article makes some valid points about the limitations of 'lifestyle politics', but most of the Anarchist Workers Group who published this short-lived magazine have subsequently joined the RCP, an example of leftism as lifestyle if ever there was one!

<sup>4</sup> The gradual invasion of Stonehenge by market forces is looked at in more depth in 'Om sweet Om - A Cautionary Tale of Stonehenge, Convoys, Mutoids etc', an article in *No Reservations - Housing, Space and Class Struggle*, BM CRL London WC1N 3XX / News From Everywhere Box 14, 136 Kingsland High St, London E8.

<sup>5</sup> Foreign readers may not be aware of this 'battle', which was in fact so one-sided that it was more of a rout by the police. The travellers' 'convoy' was unable to breach the police roadblock, as many of us on foot had hoped it would, and was instead forced onto a heathfield near Stony Cross, not far from Stonehenge, where the police proceeded to beat the fuck out of them and trash their vehicles.

<sup>6</sup> Although billed as a benefit for Greenpeace or CND, a far greater proportion of the takings goes directly to the police.

<sup>7</sup> See 'What Future for the Real Raver?' and 'The Political Economy of Ecstasy' in *Here and Now* 14, 1993. These articles are the best attempt to throw some light on the rave scene to have reached us so far.

<sup>8</sup> See the articles in *Aufheben* 1 and 3.

<sup>9</sup> Not forgetting video-pirates, obscene telephone-callers, ('vulgar') racists, 'terrorists', ticket-touts, cannabis smokers, and gay men under 18 years old.

<sup>10</sup> The left of the party abstained because they identified certain 'progressive' clauses in the bill, such as the new law against harassment, ostensibly to deal with racists. But the law is not specific and is more likely to be used against people harassing their MPs or councillors than racists. The Labour left do not recognize that the state is the primary problem and cannot be part of the solution. Either that or they recognize that the real solution to these problems would spell their end.

<sup>11</sup> Both the SWP and Militant are flapping around like floundering fishes. The problem of the rightwards drift of the Labour Party has been compounded by the collapse of 'actually existing socialism'. Militant are finding it hard to adjust to life after entryism, dabbling in areas such as claimants unions which have tended to be in the orbit of anarchism (since the 1930s anyway) and, finding that the unemployed most into defending their conditions are often those least into identifying themselves as unemployed workers, falling dismally. The SWP, being outside of the Labour Party in the first place, and more revisionist about the Soviet Union than other Trot groups, has managed to gain a large influx of raw recruits, but has found turning such raw material into finished cadre far more difficult. If Brighton is anything to go by the SWP is in severe trouble, losing members and foundering around directionless. Only the ANL seems to be keeping the party afloat, but there is limited mileage in manufacturing fascist threats to satisfy the needs of the party, only postponing but ultimately increasing disillusionment within the ranks. We should not overestimate the crisis of the left, however, as both Militant with its 'Alliance' and the SWP with its 'Coalition' pose threats to the autonomy of the anti-CIA/POA movement.

<sup>12</sup> Although we refer to 'fluffies' and 'fluffy ideology' as if they form a coherent body of people and ideas it should be borne in mind that our 'fluffy' is something of a stereotype made necessary by the fact that the people and ideas we are referring to are so contradictory and incoherent.

<sup>13</sup> The most visible manifestations of DIY culture are the licensed squats Cool Tan Arts in Brixton and the Rainbow Church in Kenilworth Town, and the plethora of 'community arts centres' which have sprung up (and then been evicted in some cases) around the country over the last six months.

<sup>14</sup> What problematic of proletarian subjectivity? For Trotskyites there is no problematic of proletarian subjectivity, only the problem of leadership, the problem of building a vanguard to deliver the subjective requirements of revolution now that the objective conditions are ripe. For Radical Chainers there is no problem as proletarian subjectivity does not enter into their theorization of working class self-formation, as this is seen to be a process taking place behind the backs of the working class, corresponding to the socialization of production. For certain Anglophone autonomists such as Harry Cleaver or Midnight Notes there is no problem. Developments are seen as the outcome of two competing strategies; thus working class subjectivity is simply assumed by the existence of a working class strategy.

This neat assumption allows them to see working class struggle in all manner of apparently liberal social struggles and relate to them uncritically. The uncritical acceptance of working class subjectivity linking apparently separate single issues gets around the problem of the liberal aspects of those struggles by ignoring them. This strategy may be suited to demonstrating the continuing relevance of a theory of class struggle to American academia, adequate for a relation to those struggles of contemplative if supportive separation. But for subjects engaging in those struggles as revolutionaries, the liberal aspects need to be criticized mercilessly in order to make practical links between struggles in such a way as to bring out the underlying class content. Many ultra-leftists share this assumption of the existence of working class subjectivity, but draw exactly the opposite conclusions. They cling to an ideal of assumed working class subjectivity which the reality of class struggle stubbornly refuses to live up to, seeing, for example, in anti-fascism only a defence of democracy, in student struggles only a defence of privilege, in feminism only bourgeois demands. This inability to grasp the contradictions within these movements find its logical conclusion in rejecting the grounding of communism in the fundamental contradiction of capitalism in favour of primitivist romanticism. But none of these ways of glossing over the problem are adequate. We can neither take these struggles at face value and dismiss them critically, nor ignore what they say they are and accept them uncritically. Revolutionary praxis requires a critical engagement with the existing contradictions, the search for possibilities of developing struggles beyond the liberal perspectives which hold them back - a project with both practical and theoretical moments.

<sup>15</sup> Having dealt with the problem of workerism in relation to the anti-roads movement in *Aufheben* 3 it should not be necessary to repeat our argument here. The workerism of the SWP was amply demonstrated on a demonstration in Brighton when a local hack approached some travellers' children (no more than 12 or 13 years old) who were happily chanting 'kill the bill' and taught them to chant 'the workers united will never be defeated' instead. They were a little bemused to say the least!

<sup>16</sup> The left's knee-jerk reaction of calling on the RMT to call an indefinite strike or bring out the rest of its members in solidarity ignores the fact that the strikes were very effective in their own terms. The signworkers were able to make up the pay lost on strike days in overtime sorting out the mess they had caused whilst Railtrack had to pay all their other workers for doing nothing on strike days. There was no need for them to strike as well - it would simply have saved Railtrack from having to pay their wages - unless to broaden the basis of the dispute. An autonomous strike against privatization (the RMT cannot call for such a thing due to the threat of sequestration) could have called for passenger involvement. But railway workers have chosen not to sabotage privatization, opting instead to take their chances in the break up of the industry. It is not the case that the RMT executive is simply stitching them up - they are accepting the RMT's representation because they fear the consequences of a full-blooded strike.

<sup>17</sup> Operation Emily was named after Emily Pankhurst, the respectable face of the suffragettes. The fluffies are presumably unaware of the more proletarian elements in the suffragette movement who were not averse to a bit of class violence. Sylvia Pankhurst, for example, would have approved of the use to which another set of railings were put later in the year.

<sup>18</sup> Having to fix the drains did, however, add to the contractor's costs and further delay the opening of the road. But the main value of the sabotage lay in its impact on the mood of the crowd, undermining the position of those fluffies who considered sabotage of property to be 'violence' and therefore illegitimate.

<sup>19</sup> The problem was discussed at the 'Interactive Diners Club' in the Rainbow Centre, where someone who was particularly worried about hantsab suggested spraying 'trouble makers' with paint to make them

identifiable to the police, a suggestion which was thankfully quashed by an Exodus delegate. Then, a week or so before the demonstration, the Freedom Network in Cool Tan proposed pulling out of the demonstration altogether and organizing an alternative non-confrontational event on the same day in a different location, and had to be persuaded not to by groups around the country who had spent weeks arranging transport etc.

<sup>20</sup> The Criminal Justice Bill attacks our right to peaceful protest. It is vital that we defend this ... in a peaceful way. In the past large events have been turned into 'riots' by a combination of heavy-handed policing and violent agitators in the crowd ... it is up to you not to be provoked. ... The 'law and order' lobby and most of the media would jump at the chance to portray us as violent hooligans who need to be forcefully dealt with. Remember you are an individual ... If one or two individuals become aggressive, forming a circle of non-violent people around them can be effective... 1) Join hands ... 2) All sit down ... 3) ... form a 'doormat' by all lying on the ground. ... Please keep to the route, which has been agreed with the police. ... Remember the police are all individuals - with families, emotions and problems of their own ... try to be friendly and polite... If you are arrested try to stay calm and do not resist arrest.' - Freedom Network.

<sup>21</sup> *Squall* did not exactly help matters by publishing an article by freelance journalist C.J. Stone. The necessarily twisted logic of those who simultaneously enjoy the thrill of refusal whilst clinging to the security of submission is demonstrated in his article 'The Triumph of Love Over Anger' in *Squall* 8, Autumn 1994. His fear of losing his role as sycophantic commentator by entering into a world free of roles where he could become anything is clear when he accuses the fluffy stewards but those fighting the police of being 'agents of the state, serving its interests not ours'. Lefty journalists delude themselves that they serve 'the people' despite the fact that they work for media whose very existence presupposes that 'the people' are kept atomized as wage-slaves. The left/liberal gloss he paints onto his lies makes C.J. Stone worse, not better, as it makes them more likely to be believed by those who really matter. He should be treated with the contempt reserved for 'agents of the state'.

<sup>22</sup> We reject out of hand the argument put forward by fluffies that the police deliberately provoked the riot. It is interesting that many 'ultra-left' types share this type of interpretation of riots.

<sup>23</sup> The press repeated the police's claim to have eventually driven the crowd from the park. This was not the case. Realizing that the crowd was gradually decreasing in size, people eventually decided *en masse* to leave together, and engaged in a bit of window smashing down Oxford Street as they went.

<sup>24</sup> As our situationist friends might put it, the totalitarianism of the spectacle does not mean that it allows only one interpretation of an event, but is rather characterized by offering a multiplicity of conflicting explanations which are all expressions of spectacular thought. The police fear the autonomous subjectivity of the crowd for obvious reasons and after they have tried to smash it by force they attempt to decompose it through the conspiracy theory. Leftists fear it as well, seeing in it the negation of their role. Whilst some may be content to see their role negated those further up the hierarchy, who have invested more of their own subjectivity in their alienated role, tend to regard it as their own nemesis. Militant demonstrated after the Poll Tax riot that the preservation of the role of mediation is not best achieved by piously denouncing that which refuses constraints on its immediacy. Thus the Coalition sought to deny the crowd's rationale by apologizing for the riot as an understandable if undesirable reaction to bad policing. Two conflicting messages for the atomized spectator to choose from, one of a passive crowd manipulated by anarchists, one of a reactive crowd provoked by the police, both seeking to deny the negation of all that is spectacular.

<sup>25</sup> Militant would undoubtedly be prepared to fill this gap with its 'Alliance', but whether the movement would give it any credence is another matter. Interestingly, the way Militant is setting up the 'Alliance' is in stark contrast to the way the anti-Poll Tax 'Federation' was established. That was set up on a delegate basis which allowed Militant to maintain a stranglehold on the organization, whereas the 'Alliance' is a loose coalition which they seem to want to dominate only through having the most coherent understanding.

<sup>26</sup> Note, for example, the much hearded occupation of a piece of derelict land in Surrey by the land reform movement 'The Land is Ours'. This group, led by the academic George Mombiot, claims to have gone beyond the so-called 'reactive' protests such as the anti-roads movements by being 'pro-active' and 'setting new agendas'. Behind this radical-liberal language, however, the movement is an attempt to reinvent CJ&POA-related activism into the democratic process; the 'new agenda' is merely one of reform - attempting to get a few more rights from the mean old landowners - and therefore falls well below the visions produced in some of the 'reactive' struggles, visions of doing away with the whole system of duties, rights and exchange altogether. Moreover, the 'direct action' of the 'Land' movement is decidedly indirect, being more concerned with creating publicity through

tokenistic events to get the attention of the powers that be than with actually changing their lives through their own action. No doubt if anyone emulated too closely the actions of the group's supposed inspiration - the Diggers - (by actually reclaiming land that the landowners wanted) they would be thrown off for being 'troublemakers'!

<sup>27</sup> *SciNews* c/o 'On the Piddle', P.O. Box 2600, Brighton, East Sussex.

<sup>28</sup> Militant Labour have been central to this aspect of the campaign, recognizing the scheme as a class issue in terms of the M77 being built to serve yuppie commuters at the expense of local proletarians rather than having developed a critique of the road building programme *per se*. Any detailed analysis of this campaign would have to confront the contradictory effects of their involvement: pushing a 'class analysis' but continually orienting events towards the media; encouraging local involvement but encouraging kids playing truant to return to school, get uncioezed, and negotiate for time off to attend the protests.

<sup>29</sup> The placards seen at recent live export demonstrations equating those unmotivated by these displays of little Englander chauvinism and dew-eyed sentimentalism with Nazi collaborators assisting the Holocaust are an offensive but logical conclusion to be drawn by the animal liberationists. Maybe it should be said that whilst, for example, residents close to Shoreham Harbour didn't lift a finger to prevent coal being brought into the port to help defeat the miners' strike, it is better that they respond to this assault on their sensibilities by clashing with the police rather than sitting at home writing letters to MPs, if for no other reason than it provides an opportunity for local proletarians to enjoy a bit of argy bargy with the cops.

<sup>30</sup> Many apparent engagements with struggles outside of this orbit are in fact attempts to extend it. Thus the engagement with the opposition to the Gulf War was on the basis of 'wars kill animals too'.

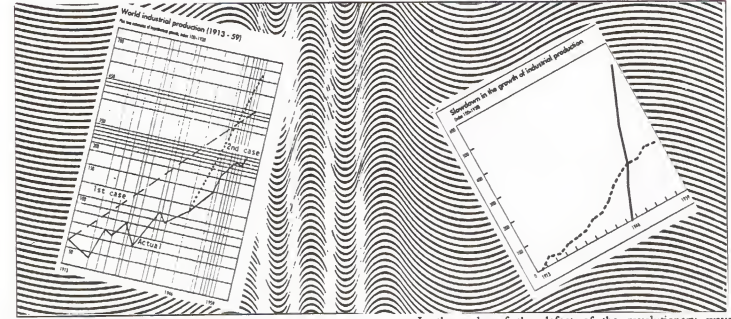
<sup>31</sup> See *Squall* 8, Autumn 1994 for details.

<sup>32</sup> *New Statesman and Society*, October 14th 1994.





## Decadence: The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory? Part Three



### Introduction: The story so far

As our more patient and devoted readers will know, the subject of this article is the theory that capitalism is in decline. In the previous two issues, we traced out in detail the development of the theory of the decline of capitalism which has emerged amongst Marxists and revolutionaries over the last hundred years. In this, the final part of the article, we shall bring our critical review up to date by examining the most recent version of the theory of decline, which has been put forward by *Radical Chains*. But before considering *Radical Chains* and their new version of the theory of the decline of capitalism, we should perhaps, for the benefit of our less patient and devoted readers, summarize the previous two parts of this article.

In Part 1, we saw how the theory of decline, and the conceptions of capitalist crisis and the transition to socialism or communism related to it, played a dominant role in revolutionary analysis of twentieth century capitalism. As we saw, the notion that capitalism is in some sense in decline originated in the classical Marxism developed by Engels and the Second International.

At the time of the revolutionary wave that ended World War I, the more radical Marxists identified the theory that capitalism was in decline as the objective basis for revolutionary politics. They took as their guiding principle the notion from Marx 'That at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution'.<sup>1</sup> They argued that capitalism had entered this stage and this was expressed in its permanent crisis and clear objective movement towards breakdown and collapse.

In the wake of the defeat of the revolutionary wave following World War I, for those traditions which claimed to represent 'proper Marxism', against its betrayal - first by the reformist Social Democrats and then by Stalinism - the acceptance of the notion that capitalism was in decline became a tenet of faith.

For the left-communists, the notion that capitalism had entered its decadent phase with the outbreak of war in 1914 was vital since it allowed them to maintain an uncompromising revolutionary position while at the same time claiming to represent the continuation of the true orthodox Marxist tradition.<sup>2</sup> For the left-communists, the reformist aspects of the politics of Marx, Engels and the Second International, which had led to support for trade unionism and for participation in parliamentary elections, could be justified on the grounds that capitalism was at that time in its ascendant phase. Now, following the outbreak of the World War I, capitalism had gone into decline and was no longer in a position to concede lasting reforms to the working class. Thus, for the left-communists, the only options in the era of capitalist decline were those of 'war or revolution'!

For the Trotskyists and other associated socialists, the increase of state intervention and planning, the growth of monopolies, the nationalization of major industries and the emergence of the welfare state all pointed to the decline of capitalism and the emergence of the necessity of socialism. As a consequence, for the Trots the task was to put forward 'transitional demands' - that is, apparently reformist demands that appear reasonable given the development of the productive forces but which contradict the prevailing capitalist relations of production.

So, despite the otherwise fundamental differences that divide left-communists from the Trots,<sup>3</sup> and which often placed them in bitter opposition to each other, for both of these tendencies the concrete reality of capitalist development was

explained in terms of an objective logic heading towards capitalist collapse and socialist revolution. The underlying objective reality of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production reduced the problem of that revolution to organizing the vanguard or party to take advantage of the crisis that would surely come.

However, instead of ending in a revolutionary upsurge as most decline theorists predicted, World War II was followed by one of the most sustained booms in capitalist history. While the productive forces seemed to be growing faster than ever before, the working class in advanced capitalist countries seemed content with the rising living standards and welfare benefits of the post-war social democratic settlements. The picture of an inescapable capitalist crisis prompting a working class reaction now seemed irrelevant.

Then, when class struggle did eventually return on a major scale, it took on forms - wildcat strikes (often for issues other than wages), refusal of work, struggles within and outside the factory - which did not fit comfortably into the schema of the old workers' movement. Many of these struggles seemed marked not by a knee-jerk reaction to economic hardship caused by 'capitalism's decline', but by a struggle against alienation in all its forms caused by capital's continued growth, and by a more radical conception of what lay beyond capitalism than was offered by socialists.

It was in this context that the new currents we looked at in Part 2 of this article emerged. What currents like *Socialism or Barbarism*, the situationists and the autonomists shared was a rejection of the 'objectivism' of the old workers' movement. Rather than put their faith in an objective decline of the economy, they emphasized the other pole: the subject. It was these theoretical currents and not the old left theorists of decline that best expressed what was happening - the May '68 events in France, the Italian Hot Autumn of '69 and a general contestation that spread right across capitalist society. Though more diffuse than the 1917-23 period, these events were a revolutionary wave questioning capitalism across the world.

However, in the 1970s, the post-war boom collapsed. Capitalist crisis returned with a vengeance. The turn by the new currents away from the mechanics of capitalist crisis which had been an advantage now became a weakness. The idea that capitalism was objectively in decline was back in favour and there was a renewal of the old crisis theory. At the same time, in the face of the crisis and rising unemployment, there was a retreat of the hopes and tendencies which the new currents had expressed.<sup>4</sup> As the crisis progressed, the refusal of work, which the new currents had connected to, and which the old leftists could not comprehend, seemed to falter before the onslaught of monetarism and the mass re-imposition of work.

However, the various rehashings of the old theory of capitalist crisis and decline were all inadequate. The sects of the old left, which had missed the significance of much of the struggle that had been occurring, were now sure that the mechanics of capitalist decline had been doing its work. Capital would be forced now to attack working class living standards and the proper class struggle would begin. These groups could now say 'we understand the crisis: flock to our banner'. They believed that, faced with the collapse of the basis of reformism, the working class would turn to them. There was much debate about the nature of the crisis; conflicting versions were offered; but the expected shift of the working class towards socialism and revolution did not occur.

This, then, is the situation we find ourselves in. While the advances of the new currents - their focus on the self-activity of the proletariat, on the radicality of communism etc. - are essential

references for us, we nevertheless need to grasp how the objective situation has changed. The restructuring that has accompanied crisis, and the subsequent retreat of working class, has made some of the heady dreams of the '68 wave seem less possible. To some extent there has been an immiseration of the imagination from which that wave took its inspiration. There is a need to rethink, to grasp the objective context in which class struggle is situated. The bourgeoisie and state do not seem able to make the same concessions to recuperate movements, so the class struggle often takes a more desperate form. In the face of a certain retreat of the subject - lack of offensive class struggle - there is a temptation to adopt some sort of decline theory. It is in this context that the ideas of the journal *Radical Chains* are important.

#### The Radical Chains synthesis

Despite all their faults and ambiguities, Radical Chains have perhaps more than any other existing group made a concerted attempt to rethink Marxism in the wake of the final collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the fall of Stalinism. In doing so, they have sought to draw together the objectivism of the Trotskyist tradition with the more 'subjectivist' and class struggle oriented theories of autonomist Marxism. From the autonomists, Radical Chains have taken the idea that the working class is not a passive victim of capital but instead forces changes on capital.<sup>5</sup> From the Trotskyist Hillel Ticktin, Radical Chains have taken the idea that one must relate such changes to the law of value, and its conflict with the emergent 'law of planning'.

In adopting the notion that the present epoch of capitalism is a transitional one, characterized by a conflict between an emergent 'law of planning' - which is identified with the emergence of communism - and a declining law of value, Radical Chains are inevitably led towards a theory of capitalist decline, albeit one which emphasizes class struggle. Indeed, as we shall see, the central argument of Radical Chains is that the growing power of the working class has forced capitalism to develop administrative forms which, while preventing and delaying the emergence of the 'law of planning' - and with this the move to communism - has undermined what Radical Chains see as capitalism's own essential regulating principle - the law of value.<sup>6</sup> As such, Stalinism and social democracy are seen by Radical Chains as the principal political forms of the 'partial suspension of the law of value' which have served to delay the transition from capitalism to communism.

However, before we examine Radical Chains' theory of the 'partial suspension of the law of value' in more detail, it is necessary to look briefly at its origins in the work of Hillel Ticktin which has been a primary influence in the formation of this theory.

#### Ticktin and the fatal attraction of fundamentalism

Hillel Ticktin is the editor and principal theorist of the non-aligned Trotskyist journal *Critique*. What seems to make Ticktin and *Critique* attractive to Radical Chains is that his analysis is not tied to the needs of a particular Trotskyist sect but takes the high ground of an attempt to recover classical Marxism. As such, for Radical Chains, Ticktin provides a perceptive and sophisticated restatement of classical Marxism.

With Ticktin, the Second International's central notion, which opposed socialism as the conscious planning of society to the anarchy of the market of capitalism, is given a 'scientific' formulation in terms of the opposition between the 'law of planning' and the 'law of value'. Ticktin then seeks to 'scientifically' explain the laws of motion of the current transitional epoch of capitalism's decline in terms of the decline of capitalism's defining regulatory principle - the 'law of value' - and the incipient rise of

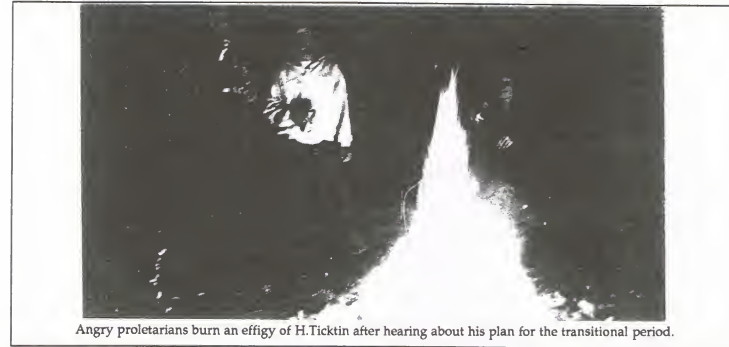
### Aufheben

the 'law of planning' which he sees as heralding the necessary emergence of socialism.

Like the leading theorists of classical Marxism, Ticktin sees the decline of capitalism in terms of the development of monopolies, increased state intervention in the economy and the

accommodate the rise of global finance capital of the past twenty-five years within the classical Marxist theory of decline. To this extent, Ticktin provides a vital contribution to the development of the classical theory of decline.

But it could be objected that the increasing autonomy of



Angry proletarians burn an effigy of H. Ticktin after hearing about his plan for the transitional period.

consequent decline of the free market and *laissez faire* capitalism. As production becomes increasingly socialized on an ever greater scale, the allocation of social labour can no longer operate simply through the blind forces of the market. Increasingly, capital and the state have to plan and consciously regulate production. Yet the full development of conscious planning contradicts the private appropriation inherent in capitalist social relations. Planning is confined to individual states and capitals and thus serves to intensify the competition between these capitals and states so that the gains of rational planning end up exploding into the social irrationality of wars and conflict. Only with the triumph of socialism on a world scale, when production and the allocation of labour will be consciously planned in the interests of society as whole, will the contradiction between the material forces of production be reconciled with the social relations of production and the 'law of planning' emerge as the principal form of social regulation.

However, unlike the leading theorists of classical Marxism, Ticktin places particular emphasis on the increasing autonomy of finance capital as a symptom of capitalism's decline. Classical Marxism, following the seminal work of Hilferding's *Finance Capital*, had seen the integration of banking capital with monopolized industrial capital as the hallmark of the final stage of capitalism which heralded the rise of rational planning and the decline of the anarchy of the market. In contrast, for Ticktin late capitalism is typified by the growing autonomy of financial capital. Ticktin sees twentieth century capitalism as a contradiction between the forms of socialization that cannot be held back and the parasitic decadent form of finance capital. Finance capital is seen as having a parasitic relation to the socialized productive forces. It manages to stop the socialization getting out of hand and thus imposes the rule of abstract labour. However, finance capital is ultimately dependent on its host - production - which has an inevitable movement towards socialization.

By defining the increasing autonomy of finance capital as symptom of capitalism's decadence, Ticktin is able to

finance capital is simply the means through which capital comes to restructure itself. In this view, the rise of global finance capital in the last twenty-five years has been the principal means through which capital has sought to outflank the entrenched working classes in the old industrialized economies by relocating production in new geographical areas and in new industries.

So while the increasing autonomy of finance capital may indeed herald the decline of capital accumulation in some areas, it only does so to the extent that it heralds the acceleration of capital accumulation in others. From this perspective, the notion that the autonomy of finance capital is a symptom of capitalism's decline appears as particularly Anglo-centric. Indeed, in this light, Ticktin's notion of the parasitic and decadent character of finance capital seems remarkably similar to the perspective of those advocates of British industry who have long lamented the 'short termism' of the City as the cause of Britain's relative industrial decline.<sup>7</sup> While such arguments may be true, by adopting them Ticktin could be accused of projecting specific causes of Britain's relative decline on to capitalism as a whole. While footloose finance capital may cause old industrialized economies to decline, it may at one and the same time be the means through which new areas of capital accumulation may arise.

This Anglo-centrism that we find in Ticktin's work can be seen to be carried over into the theory put forward by Radical Chains. But for many this would be the least of the criticisms advanced against Radical Chains' attempt to use the work of Ticktin. Ticktin is an unreconstructed Trotskyist. As such, he defends Trotsky's insistence on advancing the productive forces against the working class, which led to the militarization of labour, the crushing of the worker and sailors' uprising at Kronstadt and his loyal opposition to Stalin. But Radical Chains resolutely oppose Ticktin's Trotskyist politics. They insist they can separate Ticktin's good Marxism from his politics.

We shall argue that they can't make this separation: that in adopting Ticktin's theory of decline as their starting point they implicitly adopt his politics. But before we advance this argument



we must consider Radical Chains' theory of decline in a little more detail.

#### Radical Chains

The world in which we live is riven by a contradiction between the latent law of planning and the law of value. Within the transitional epoch as a whole these correspond to the needs of the proletariat and those of capital, which remain the polarities of class relationships across the earth.<sup>8</sup>

This quote from Radical Chains' Statement of Intent succinctly summarizes both their acceptance and their transformation of Ticktin's problematic of capitalist decline. Radical Chains' theory, like Ticktin's, is based on the idea of the conflict between two different organizational principles. It is not enough for the proletariat to be an 'agent of struggle'; it must be 'the bearer of a new organizational principle that, in its inescapable antagonism to value, must make capital a socially explosive and eventually doomed system.'<sup>9</sup>

But Radical Chains are not Ticktin. Radical Chains accept the idea that the proper working of the law of value has given way to distorted forms of its functioning. However, there is a very significant shift in Radical Chains from conceiving of the law of value purely in terms of the relations between capitals to seeing it in terms of the capital/labour relation. The crucial object of the law of value is not products, but the working class.<sup>10</sup> Thus while for Ticktin it is phenomena like monopoly pricing and governmental interference in the economy that undermine the law of value, for Radical Chains it is the recognition and administration of needs outside the wage - welfare, public health and housing, etc.<sup>11</sup> This is an important shift because it allows Radical Chains to bring in the class struggle.

Central to Radical Chains' theory is the interplay between the state and the law of value. Their combination creates regimes of need, which is to say ways in which the working class is controlled. If the orthodox decline theory has a schema based on *laissez faire* free markets as capitalism's maturity and monopoly capitalism its decline, Radical Chains offer a similar schema based on the application of the law of value to labour-power. Capital's maturity was when the working class was brought fully under the law of value; capital's decline is the period when that full subordination was partially suspended by administrative forms.

#### Full Law of Value

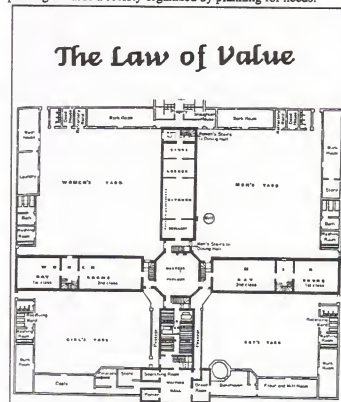
For Radical Chains, the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act was the 'programmatic high point' of capitalism because it marked the establishment of labour-power as a commodity. In the previous Poor Law, the subsistence needs of the working class were met through a combination of wages from employers and a range of forms of parish relief. The New Poor Law unified the wage, by terminating these forms of local welfare. In their place it offered a sharp choice between subsistence through wage labour or the workhouse. The workhouse was made as unpleasant as possible to make it an effective non-choice. Thus the working class was in a position of absolute poverty. Its needs were totally subordinate to money, to the imperative to exchange labour-power for the wage. Thus its existence was totally dependent on accumulation. This, Radical Chains argue, was the proper existence of the working class within capitalism.

#### Decline?

For Radical Chains, only when the subjective existence of the working proletariat corresponds to this state of absolute poverty is capitalism in proper correspondence with the pristine objectivity of the law of value. Once there is a change in this relation, capital goes into decline.

#### The 'Partial Suspension of the Law of Value'

This full subordination of working class existence to money prompted the working class to see its interests as completely opposed to those of capital and, as a result, to develop forms of collectivity which threatened to destroy capital. The threat is based on the fact that the working class, though atomized by the law of value in exchange, is collectivized by its situation in production. The law of value tries to impose abstract labour, but the working class can draw on its power as particular concrete labour. Radical Chains' idea of proletarian self-formation expressing the law of planning is bound to its existence as a socialized productive force. In response to the full workings of the law of value, the working class developed its own alternative, pushing towards a society organized by planning for needs.



Ground floor of the Poor Law Commissioners' recommended plan for a workhouse to contain 300 paupers' designed by Sampson Kempthorne from the First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1835.

The bourgeoisie recognized the inevitable and intervened with 'administrative substitutes for planning'. One aspect to the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value is that the bourgeoisie accepted forms of representation of the working class. Responsible unions and working class parties were encouraged. At the same time, there was the abandonment of the rigours of the Poor Law. Radical Chains trace the eventual post World War II social democratic settlement to processes begun by far-sighted members of the bourgeoisie long before. From the late nineteenth century, haphazard forms of poor relief began to supplement the Poor Law. The 1906-12 Liberal government systematized this move to administered welfare.

Such reforms amounted to a fundamental modification of the law of value: the relaxation of the conditions of absolute poverty. The wage was divided with one part remaining tied to work while the other became administered by the state. There was

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a move to what Radical Chains call the 'formal recognition of need': that is, the working class can get needs met through forms of administration. Bureaucratic procedures, forms, tests and so on enter the life of the working class.

There are now two sides to capital - the law of value and administration. This Partial Suspension of the Law of Value represents national deals with the working class. The global proletariat is divided into national sections which have varying degrees of defence from the law of value. This acts to stop the proletariat's global unification as a revolutionary class, but it also acts as a limit on the effectiveness of the law of value which must act globally.

### *Crisis of the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value*

Within the forms of the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value, the working class struggles. It uses the existence of full employment and welfare to increase both sides of the divided wage. Administration proves a much less effective way of keeping the working class in check than the pure workings of the market. Radical Chains see the forms of struggle that the new currents connected to as evidence of the working class breaking out of its containment. The last twenty years or so are seen by Radical Chains as a crisis of the forms of prevention of communism to which capital has responded by trying to reunify the wage and reassert the law of value. Radical Chains do not see much point in looking at the different struggles; the point is to locate them within a grand theoretical perspective!

The attraction of Radical Chains' theory is that the concrete developments of the twentieth century are explained by a combination of subjective and objective factors. Revolutionary theory has a tendency to see the subjective aspect - working class struggle - appearing in revolutionary periods and disappearing without trace at other times. Radical Chains conceptualize the subjective as contained within the forms of the prevention of communism - Stalinism and social democracy - but continuing to struggle and finally exploding them. This analysis seems to have a revolutionary edge, for Radical Chains use the theory to criticize the left's tendency to become complicit with these forms of the prevention of communism. However, there is an ambiguity here because Radical Chains hinge their account on the idea of an underlying process - the breakdown of the essence of capitalism before the essence of communism - planning. This, as we shall argue, is exactly the framework that leads to the left's complicity with capital.

However, before moving to the fundamental conceptual problems that Radical Chains inherit from Tickin we should point out some problems with their historical account of the rise and fall of capitalism.

### *In the Blink of an Eye*

Radical Chains are right to see the New Poor Law as expressing bourgeois dreams of a working class totally subordinated to capital. They imagine that this period of proper domination beginning in 1834 and lasting till the beginnings of the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value with the movement towards haphazard forms of poor relief in the 1880s, the mature period of capitalism, lasts around fifty years.

But there is a difference between intent and reality. The New Poor Law while enacted in 1834 was resisted by the working class and the parishes so that it was not until the 1870s that it became properly enforced. So virtually as soon as it was enforced the New Poor Law began to be undermined.<sup>12</sup> From this it would seem that the high point of capitalism becomes reduced to little more than a decade or two. From an historical perspective in

which feudalism lasted ~~for~~ more than a several centuries, capitalism's maturity is over in the blink of an eye.

Against this notion that capitalism matured for a mere twenty years in the later part of the nineteenth century and has ever since been in decline, it can of course be countered that the world has become far more capitalist during the course of the twentieth century than it has ever been. This view would seem to become substantiated once we grasp the development of capitalism not in terms of the decline of the law of value, but in terms of the shift from the *formal* to the *real subsumption of labour to capital* and the concomitant shift in emphasis from the *production of absolute surplus-value to the production of relative surplus-value*.<sup>13</sup>

### *Formal and Real Domination*

In the period dominated by the production of absolute surplus-value, the imperative of the control of labour is simply to create sufficient hardship to force the proletarians through the factory gates.<sup>14</sup> However, once relative surplus-value becomes predominant, a more sophisticated role is required. The capital/labour relation had to be reconstructed. The reduction in necessary labour required the mass production of consumption goods. A constant demand for those goods then became essential to capital. As a result, the working class became an important source not only of labour but also of demand. At the same time, the continual revolutionizing of the means of production required a more educated workforce and a more regulated reserve army of the unemployed.

Of course Radical Chains are right that these changes are also being forced on capital by the threat of proletarian self-organization. But the idea that they thereby represent capital's decline is not justified. It is only with these new ways of administering the class that relative surplus-value can be effectively pursued. The phenomena of Taylorism and Fordism indicate that capitalism in the twentieth century - the pursuit of relative surplus-value - still had a lot of life in it. Indeed, the post-war boom in which capitalism grew massively based on full employment and the linking of rising working class living standards and higher productivity is perhaps the period when working class needs and accumulation were at their most integrated.

Indeed, from this perspective, the New Poor Law was more of a transitional form in the development of capitalism. On the one hand it was in keeping with the draconian legislation that capital required in its long period of emergence. On the other hand it created a national system to control labour. The multitude of boards that it set up are the direct forerunners of the administrative bodies that came to replace it.

So, rather than a massive break, there is a great deal of continuity between the sorts of institutions created by the 1834 Act and those bureaucratic structures that were set up later. The forms of systematic national management of labour that were created by the New Poor Law simply to discipline the working class were the material basis for new relations of representation, administration and intervention.

We can see, then, that the New Poor Law was introduced to fulfil the needs of a period of the production of absolute surplus-value. What is more, though it was enacted in 1834, it was only in the 1870s that its provisions totally replaced earlier systems of relief. By this time, capital was shifting to its period in which the production of relative surplus-value came to predominate, and this required a new way of relating to labour.<sup>15</sup>

The underlying problem of Radical Chains' historical analysis is that they take the *laissez faire* stage of capitalism at its

own word. Its word is an individualist ideology which was immediately undermined by the growth of collective forms. The idea of a perfect regime of needs under the law of value is a myth. The law of value and capital have always been constrained, first by forms of landed property and of community which preceded it, and then by the class struggle growing up within it. Capital is forced to relate to the working class by other means than the wage, and the state is its necessary way of doing this. The Poor Law expressed one strategy for controlling the working class: administration expresses a different one. Once we see the law of value as always constrained, then the idea of its partial suspension loses its resonance.

#### The fetishism of planning

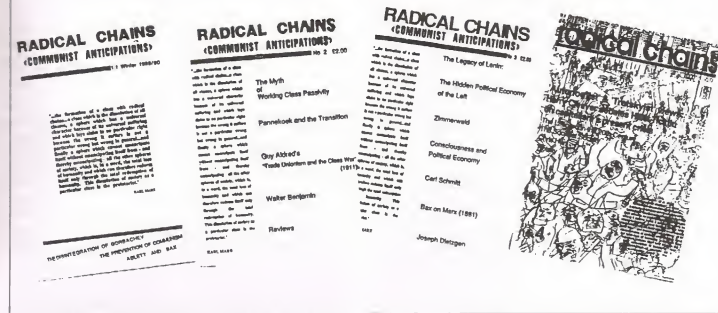
Given that Radical Chains seek to emphasize the relation of struggle between the working class and capital, it may seem strange that they do not consider the shift from the formal to real subsumption of labour to capital. Yet such a consideration would not only undermine their commitment to a theory of decline but also run counter to the conceptual framework that they have drawn from classical Marxism through Tickin. To examine this more closely we must return briefly once more to the origins of classical Marxism's theory of decline.

must step in to take over the baton of economic development. From this perspective, socialism appears as little more than the planned development of the forces of production.<sup>17</sup>

However, viewing history in terms of the contradiction between the development of the forces of production and existing social relations, where each form of society is seen to be replaced by a succeeding one which can allow a further development of the forces of production, is to take the view point of capital. By articulating this view, Marx sought to turn the perspective of capital against itself. Marx sought to show that, like preceding societies, capitalism will repeatedly impose limits on the development of the forces of production and therefore open up the possibility for capitalism's own supersession on its own terms.

From the point of view of capital, history is nothing more than the development of the productive forces; it is only with capitalism that production fully realizes itself as an alien force that can appear abstracted from human needs and desires. Communism must not only involve the abolition of classes but also the abolition of the forces of production as a separate power.

By seeing socialism principally as the rationally planned development of the forces of production - and opposing this to the anarchy of the market of capitalism - classical Marxists ended up adopting the perspective of capital. It was this perspective that



As we have already noted, the notion of an objectively determined decline of capitalism is rooted in the orthodox interpretation of the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* where Marx states that 'At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution'.<sup>16</sup> For the classical Marxist at the turn of the century, it seemed clear that the social relations of private appropriation and the market were becoming fetters on the increasingly socialized forces of production. The driving force towards revolution was therefore conceptualized as the contradiction between the productive forces' need for socialist planning and the anarchy of the market and private appropriation.

Of course, implicit in all this is the idea that socialism only becomes justified once it becomes historically necessary to further develop the forces of production on a more rational and planned basis. Once capitalism has exhausted its potential of developing the forces of production on the basis of the law of value, socialism

allowed the Bolsheviks to take up the tasks of a surrogate bourgeoisie once they had seized power in Russia, since it committed them to the development of the forces of production at all costs. The logic of this perspective was perhaps developed most of all by Trotsky who, through his support for the introduction of Taylorism, one-man management, the militarization of labour and the crushing of the rebellion at Kronstadt, consistently demonstrated his commitment to develop the forces of production over and against the needs of the working class.

As a long committed Trotskyist, there are no problems for Tickin in identifying socialism with planning. Indeed, in restating classical Marxism and developing the contradictions between planning and the anarchy of the market, Tickin draws heavily on the work of Preobrazhensky who, alongside Trotsky, was the leading theoretician of the Left-Opportunity in the 1920s. It was Preobrazhensky who first developed the distinction between the law of planning and the law of value as the two competing principles of economic regulation in the period of the transition



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from capitalism to socialism. It was on the basis of this distinction that Preobrazhensky developed the arguments of the Left- Opposition for the rapid development of heavy industry at the expense of the living standards of the working class and the peasantry. Arguments that were later to be put into practice, after the liquidation of the Left-Opposition, under Stalin.<sup>18</sup>

For Radical Chains, adopting the notion that we are in the period of capitalist decline and the consequent transition to socialism, in which the principal contradiction is that between the law of value and the law of planning, is far more problematic. An important part of Radical Chains' project is their attempt to reject the traditional politics of the left, particularly that of Leninism. This is made clear in such articles as 'The hidden political economy of the left', where they resolutely stress importance of the passivity of the working class and attack the Leninist notion of the imposed discipline. Yet this is undermined by their adherence to the 'good Marxism' of Tickin.

As a result, we find that when pressed on the question of planning Radical Chains' position becomes both slippery and highly ambiguous. Their way of vindicating planning is virtually to identify it with self-emancipation. They ask us to make a revolution in the name of planning and insist that really that is fine because Planning is the social presence of the freely associating proletariat and, beyond that, the human form of existence.<sup>19</sup> But planning is planning. The free association of the proletariat is the free association of the proletariat. For all their efforts, by refusing to break with the framework set out by Tickin, Radical Chains end up simply criticizing the left's idea of planning from the point of view of planning. For us, this classical leftist Marxism must not be revitalized but undermined. This means questioning its very framework.

For us, the market or law of value is not the essence of capital;<sup>20</sup> its essence is rather the *self-expansion of value*: that is, of alienated labour. Capital is above all an organizing of alienated labour involving a combination of market aspects and planning aspects. Capitalism has always needed planning and it has always needed markets. The twentieth century has displayed a constant tension between capitalism's market and planning tendencies. What the left has done is identify with one pole of this process, that of planning. But our project is not simply equal to planning. Communism is the abolition of all capitalist social relations, both of the market and of the alien plan. Of course, some form of social planning is a necessary prerequisite for communism: but the point is not planning as such, as a separate and specialized activity, but planning at the service of the project of free creation of our lives. The focus would be on the production of *ourselves*, not things. Not the planning of work and development of the productive forces, but the planning of free activity at the service of the free creation of our own lives.

### Radical Chains concluded

With Radical Chains we have the most recent and perhaps most sophisticated restatement of the classical Marxist theory of decline. Yet, for us, their attempt to unite such an objectivist Marxist theory with the more class struggle oriented theories which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s has failed, leaving them in a politically compromised position. With Radical Chains our odyssey is complete and we can draw to some kind of conclusion.

### In Place of a Conclusion

Is capitalism in decline? Coming to terms with theories of capitalist decline has involved a coming to terms with Marxism. One of the essential aspects of Marx's critique of political

economy was to show how the relations of capitalist society are not natural and eternal. Rather, he showed how capitalism was a transitory mode of production. Capital displays itself as transitory. Its negation is within it, and there is a movement to abolish it. However, the theory of decline is not for us. It focuses on decline as a period *within* capitalism and it identifies the process of going beyond capital with changes in the forms of capital rather than the struggle against them.

Decline cannot be seen as an objective period of capitalism, nor can the progressive aspect to capital be seen as an earlier period now passed. The progressive and decadent aspects of capital have always been united. Capitalism has always involved a decadent negative process of the commodification of life by value. It has also involved the creation of the universal class in opposition, rich in needs and with the ultimate need for a new way of life beyond capital.

The problem with Marxist orthodoxy is that it seeks capital's doom not in the collective forms of organization and struggle of the proletariat but in the forms of capitalist socialization. It imposes a linear evolutionary model on the shift from capitalism to communism. The revolutionary movement towards communism involves rupture: the theorization of the decline of capitalism misses this by identifying with aspects of capital. As Pannekoek pointed out, the real decline of capital is the self-emancipation of the working class.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *A Contribution...* - we'll come back to the meaning of this later

<sup>2</sup> Pannekoek was a dissenting voice in the move by the left- and council communists to embrace a theory of decline.

<sup>3</sup> While left-communism has defended revolutionary positions against Trotskyism, this defence is undermined and appears dogmatic by being grounded on a rigid conception of capitalist decadence.

<sup>4</sup> The autonomists made the best theoretical response with their class struggle theory of crisis, but this lost its way when the offensive class struggle receded.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Negri's argument that the Keynesian form of the state, which promoted full employment and rising living standards paid for by increased productivity, was a strategic response by capital to the threat of proletarian revolution. A. Negri (1988). *Revolution Retrieved*. London: Red Notes.

<sup>6</sup> Part of the whole problem with Radical Chains and Ticktin is the use of the term 'law of value'. The idea is that, by referring to the 'law of value', a profundity is reached. As Radical Chains say, 'The analysis puts the law of value at the centre. Agreement or disagreement requires a grasp of the law of value.' It is because Ticktin has done this that Radical Chains see him as a good Marxist. The law of value is used to sum up capitalism - it is its essence. But if law of value is used like this, it must be taken in its widest possible sense as summing up all the laws of motion of capital: the production and accumulation of absolute surplus-value, the revolutionizing of the labour process to produce relative surplus-value, the compulsion to increase productivity and so on. On the other hand, the law of value has a narrower meaning simply as the market. When the two senses become confused, when changes to the narrow law of value - limits on the market - are seen as capital's decline, the other aspects of capitalism are forgotten. Radical Chains think they have opened up the meaning of the law of value by focussing it on labour-power, but they still conceive of it purely in terms of the market.

<sup>7</sup> The idea originating with Hilferding that the era of capitalism's decline is marked by the integration of banking capital with industrial capital can equally be accused of Germano-centrism since Hilferding based such conclusions on the high level of integration of banking capital and the big cartels that typified the German economy at the turn of the century.

<sup>8</sup> Statement of Intent *Radical Chains 1-3*. In issue 4 there is a slight change. The new formulation is 'The world in which we live is given by a contradiction between the need for and possibility of planning and the law of value.'

<sup>9</sup> *Radical Chains* 4, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> 'The law of value does not stand apart from the working class as a separate mechanism; it would be more purposeful to say that the law of value is the existence of the working class standing apart from itself.' *Radical Chains* 4, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ticktin occasionally mentions the need-based sector as one factor in the law of value's decline but Radical Chains revolve their theory around it.

<sup>12</sup> The best source on this topic is chapter three of *Public Order and the Law of Labour* by Geoff Kay and James Mott (MacMillan, 1982). Essentially Kay and Mott's point is that the application of the law of value to labour through the wage contract has always occurred within a wider law of labour backed by the state. Radical Chains would seem to be very indebted to the analysis in this book, yet Kay and Mott describe no pure subordination which declines. Rather, because the application of the labour contract is always insufficient - labour-power refuses to be simply a commodity - different controls have constantly to be developed.

<sup>13</sup> Marx grasped the nature of class exploitation in capitalist society as being hidden in the payment of a wage for a period of labour some of which - necessary labour - replaced the wages, the rest - unnecessary labour - produced a surplus-value. Absolute surplus-value increases surplus-value by extending the working day. Relative surplus-value increases surplus-value by decreasing the amount of time necessary to reproduce the wage. Relative surplus-value thus requires an increase in productivity. The two forms are not mutually exclusive, but one can say that as capitalism develops there is an important shift where the application of science and technology to the revolutionizing of the productive forces in pursuit of relative surplus-value becomes decisive.

<sup>14</sup> In the period dominated by the production of absolute surplus-value, the capitalist takes over a labour process that, while capable of greater efficiency of scale, remains essentially the same as it did before capital took it over. Relative surplus-value, on the other hand, demands that the capitalists reorganize the whole labour process. There is a constant revolutionizing of the productive forces; production becomes specifically capitalist and dominates the worker.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Law of Labour*, Kay and Mott are good on this. It seems that what Radical Chains have done is take a text written from a more autonomist type perspective and fitted its notions of needs and capacities into a decline problematic. It does not fit.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, *Early Writings* (Penguin: Harmondsworth) pp. 425-6.

<sup>17</sup> It seems to us that, while the dialectic between the forces and relations of production may have been instrumental in the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie, it cannot be the guarantee of the decline of capital. This contradiction may be the root of crisis, but this does not mean a terminal crisis requiring socialism to resolve it. Unlike earlier modes of production, capitalism is not tied to a level of the productive forces. Rather it is based on the constant revolutionizing of them. It does create a barrier to their growth in the fact that it can only produce for the market. However, the barrier that capital creates to itself is a barrier that it constantly tries to overcome. Capital constantly revolutionizes productive relations to allow its continued expansion. This need to constantly transform social relations means that capital is constantly forced to confront the working class. An established pattern of class compromise cannot be maintained indefinitely. The crisis may create conditions where the proletariat moves towards opposing its needs to those of capital. But equally it is possible for capital to resolve the contradiction at a higher level of the productive forces. Capital revolutionizes its own social relations to continue to develop the productive forces. The perspective of the productive forces is that of capital not the proletariat. The proletarian perspective is of a conscious breaking of that contradiction which otherwise continues.

To take the point by Marx in his 'Preface' as justification for the idea of decline confuses logical with historical decline. Capitalism contains within it the logical/real possibility of decline: i.e., defetishization of the law of value and the creation of the free association of producers in its place. But to see that possibility as a historical fact/epoch is reification: the process of a part of capital (i.e., the proletariat) going beyond capital is reified into something within and of capital and its change of forms. This is not to say that defetishization and thus communism is an ahistorical possibility with no relation to the development of capitalism and the productive forces; in the world market and in the reduction of necessary labour, capitalism creates the basis for communism. But there is no technical level of the productive forces at which communism becomes inevitable or further capitalist development impossible. There is an organic relation between the class struggle and capitalist development. At times, the development of capital and the class reaches a point of possible rupture. Revolutionaries and the class take their chance; if the wave fails to go beyond capital, then capitalism continues at a higher level. Capitalism restructures to neutralize the composition of the class which attacked it: i.e., capitalism takes different forms. The further development of the productive forces is in a way, then, the booty prize for failed revolutions.

<sup>18</sup> It was Stalinism's commitment to planning that led Trotsky and orthodox Trotskyism (together with a multitude of Western socialist intellectuals) to see the USSR as progressive. Ticktin's 'break' from this tradition is to claim that the USSR had neither planning or the market. Ticktin contends that for Lenin and Trotsky planning was necessarily 'democratic'. Lenin's support for Taylorism, and Trotsky's call for the militarization of labour, show that the early Bolsheviks' ideas concerning planning cannot be so easily separated from the Stalinist version. To simply insist on adding the word 'democratic' to the socialist project of the planned development of the productive forces is clearly inadequate. Capital as a social relation is quite compatible with democracy. Communism is a content - the abolition of wage labour - not a form. The unreconstructed nature of Ticktin's Trotskyism is clearly shown in 'What would a socialist society be like?' in *Critique* 25. It involves, after the taking of power, the gradual elimination of finance capital, the 'gradual phasing out of the reserve army of the unemployed', the 'nationalisation of major firms and their gradual socialisation.'!

<sup>19</sup> *Radical chains* 1, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> The law of value is one way the *essence of capitalism expresses itself*. Competition and the market is the way that the law of value is imposed on individual capitals.

## Civilization and its latest discontents

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**Review Article:**  
**Fredy Perlman (1983). *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*. Detroit: Black & Red.**

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I'm born in a certain age which has certain instruments of production and certain kinds of knowledge; I have the possibility to combine my ability with my knowledge, and can use the socially available means of production as instruments with which to realize an individual or collective project.  
(R. Gregoire & F. Perlman, 1969)<sup>1</sup>

Civilization is under attack. A new critical current has emerged in recent years, united by an antagonism towards all tendencies that seem to include 'progress' as part of their programme. Perlman's book, described in the AK Distribution 1993 Catalogue as 'One of the most significant and influential anarchic texts of the last few decades' (p. 30), is one of the key texts in this 'primitivist' current. In the U.S.A. and this country, it is in anarchist circles - particularly amongst those engaged in eco-struggles - that primitivism has become particularly popular. But Perlman used to be a Marxist (see the quote above), and he contributed usefully to the development of a libertarian version of Marx's theory for a number of years. The wholesale abandonment of Marx in favour of primitivism has touched the non-Leninist revolutionary milieu in this country too, with the recent conversion of *Wildcat*<sup>2</sup> to the anti-civilization position.

One direction that the primitivist current points in is the need to develop a critique of technology. This is something the old left cannot grasp, and is one of the reasons why it is unable to connect properly with tendencies toward communism. According to most varieties of leftism, technological progress and therefore economic growth will be of universal benefit so long as they are planned rationally; what prevents the full and rational development of the forces of production is the irrationality of the capitalist market. All this is reflected in the way leftists relate to the new struggles over technological 'progress', such as the anti-roads movement. Thus, while opportunists like the SWP treat these new struggles as valid only because they might be fertile grounds for recruitment to the 'real' struggle, leftists who are more openly traditional on this issue - such as the RCP - repeat the old claim that what the proles really want is more and better roads (so we can all get to work on time, perhaps!); a modern infrastructure is necessary for growth, and an expanding economy necessarily makes for a better quality of life.

The old project of simply taking over existing means of production was the creation of an era before capital had so thoroughly invested its own subjectivity in technology, design and the labour process. The technology that promises to liberate us in fact enslaves us by regulating our activities in and through work and leisure; machines and factories pollute our environments and destroy our bodies; their products offer us the image of real life instead of its substance. Now, more than ever, it is often more appropriate to smash existing means of production than merely manage them differently. We must therefore go beyond leftist notions of the neutrality of technology and problematize their definitions of progress.

The current anti-roads movement offers an example of a *practical* critique of progress - that is, one which contests dominant definitions of progress through physically disrupting their implementation. As we argued in our last issue, struggles such as that over the M11 link road in north-east London should

be understood as part of the class struggle. This is often despite the ideas of those taking part, some of which echo Perlman's *ideological* critique of progress. In contrast to the practical critique, the ideological critique actively *hinders* an adequate critique of capitalism. Thus Perlman rejects unwanted leftist notions only through a retreat into a form of romantic quasi-anarchism which is unable to grasp the movement necessary to abolish capital. Given that Perlman is only one voice, however, the present article will use a review of his book as a springboard for a critique of other expressions of the new primitivist current.

### The case against 'progress'

Perlman's book begins by distinguishing between a state of nature (harmony between humanity and the rest of nature) and civilization. Civilization began, not because everyone wanted to improve their conditions of existence, not because of 'material conditions', but because a small group of people imposed it on everyone else. Perlman traces the origin of civilization to the Sumerians, who, he says, felt obliged to build waterworks to ensure a regular supply of water. The Sumerians invested power to direct the building of the waterworks in one individual, who eventually became a powerful expert elite and then a warrior elite - the first ruling class, in effect. Under the direction of their ruling class, the Sumerians then waged war on their neighbours, eventually enslaving them. The rest of Perlman's book is taken up with the rest of world history, comprising the evolution of - and resistance to - various types of Leviathan (the name, taken from Hobbes, which Perlman uses for civilization, class society or the state), each of which takes in human beings as its living energy, is animated by them, and excretes them out as it decays, only to be replaced by yet another Leviathan. Leviathans fight with each other, but the winner is always Leviathan. Given that the opposition is between Leviathan and the oppressed majority, the differences between types of class society can therefore be largely glossed over.

Perlman appears to agree with Marx that what distinguishes civilization from primitive communism is the development of the means of production, which enabled surplus labour and thus the existence of a parasitic non-productive class. But the book challenges the traditional Marxist view by suggesting that in primitive communism there were already 'surpluses'.<sup>3</sup> If there was no problem with means of subsistence, then there could be no need to develop the means of production. The emergence of civilization is therefore comparable with the 'fall' from the Garden of Eden.

However, Perlman's claim that the ancient Sumerians felt obliged to introduce technological innovation suggests that primitive communism wasn't always so idyllic after all: the place where they were living was 'hellish'; they were intent on 'farming a jungle'; in the rainy season the floods carried off both their crops and their houses, while in the dry season their plants dried up and died.<sup>4</sup> This might suggest that population



growth forced people to live in marginal lands, away from any surpluses. It also seems to conflict with Perlman's repeated claim that material conditions were not responsible for the development of technology and thus civilization; if lack of a regular water supply isn't a material condition, then what is? Similarly, the material condition of a growing population isn't discussed.<sup>5</sup> The social relations Perlman describes which accompany the new technology seem to be rather arbitrary. Much (the whole of history, in fact) seems to hinge on the decision made by the 'wise' (sic) Sumerian elders to appoint 'a strong young man' to be the 'supervisor' of the waterworks project. (So is *chance* to blame rather than the small minority?)

The writings of John Zerzan, such as his collection of essays *Elements of Refusal*,<sup>6</sup> seems to take Perlman's general argument further (back). Zerzan's writings are not orthodox within the new primitivist current, but they have been important in the American primitivist and eco-anarchist scenes in setting agendas for debate on issues such as agriculture. The whole problem in Zerzan's view may be summarized as follows: symbolization set in motion the series of horrors that is civilization's trajectory. Symbolization led to ideas of time, number, art and language which in turn led to agriculture. Religion gets the blame as well, being carried by language, and being one of the prime culprits for agriculture: food production is 'at base... a religious activity' (p. 70). But why is agriculture so bad? According to Zerzan, 'captivity itself and every form of enslavement has agriculture as its progenitor or model' (p. 75). Therefore while Perlman might have wanted to defend existing primitive communities against encroaching capitalist development, Zerzan sees anyone using agriculture as already alienated and therefore not worth saving: even most tribal types wouldn't be pure enough for him. Similarly, permaculture is an aspiration of many primitivists, but, within Zerzan's vision, this too would be part of the problem since it is a method of production. His later work<sup>7</sup> has even dismissed hunter-gathering - since hunting leads to symbolism (and all the rest).

It might be easy to dismiss many of Perlman's and Zerzan's arguments as just half-baked idealism. They are not particularly original, and indeed might be said to be no more than vulgarizations of the ideas of Camatte (see below); if we are interested in theory, it might therefore be more appropriate to develop a critique of his work rather than theirs. However, Camatte is far less well known and far less influential than either Perlman or Zerzan. The fact that their ideas are becoming something of a material force - in the form of an increasing number of people engaged in struggle espousing primitivism - means that we have to take them seriously in their own right.

#### The modern context of primitivism

Ideas of a golden age and a rejection of civilization are nothing new. The Romantic Movement in bourgeois philosophy began with Rousseau, who eulogized unmediated relations with 'nature' and characterized 'industry' as evil. (Perlman quotes Rousseau approvingly.) But why has this old idea become so popular now?

It would seem no coincidence that anti-civilization ideas have blossomed in particular in the U.S.A. It is easy to see how such ideas can take hold in a place where there is still a recognizable wilderness which is currently being destroyed by production. The U.S.A. differs from Europe also in the fact that it lacks the long history of struggle that characterizes the transition from feudalism to capitalism (and the making of the proletariat). Instead, it has had the wholesale imposition of capitalism on indigenous cultures - a real genocide. Moreover, in recent years, the U.S.A. has also differed from Europe in the extent of the defeat of proletarian struggle over there.

Defeat brings pessimism, and when the current radical movement is on the decline, it may be easier to be radical about the past than to be radical in a practical way in the present.<sup>8</sup> In

the biography of Perlman, we can trace a movement from hope in the proletariat as the liberatory force to a turn to nature and the past in the context of defeat. As a Marxist, Perlman was caught up in the events of 1968, where he discovered the texts and ideas of the Situationist International, anarchism and the Spanish Revolution, and council communism. Afterwards, however, on moving to the U.S.A., '[t]he shrinking arena for meaningful political activity in the early 70s led Fredy to see himself as less of an "activist" and more as a rememberer.'<sup>9</sup> Perlman's development is closely linked with that of Jacques Camatte, sometime comrade of the Italian left-communist Bordiga. Camatte broke with left-communist organizations partly due to his recognition of the need to go beyond their (objectivist) perspective and rethink Marx on the basis of the radical promise offered by such texts as the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' (The 'missing sixth chapter' of *Capital* Volume I), the *Grundrisse*, and the *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. However, Camatte eventually concluded that capital was in fact all powerful; given this, the proletariat offered no hope and the only option for humanity was to run away and escape somehow.

In the case of Zerzan, his early work romanticizes proletarian spontaneity; on the basis of his observations of apparently new expressions of resistance in the form of worker sabotage and absenteeism, he pronounced this to be the future of class struggle.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1980s, the recession threw millions out of work. We might take this as the vindication of his critics' predictions about the transience of these forms of the revolt against work as viable expressions of the class struggle; for in the face of widespread unemployment how could workers commit sabotage or go absent? But instead of recognizing the setbacks to the struggle as a whole, Zerzan saw in the new unemployment figures the 'collapse' of capitalism and the 'vitality' of the revolt against work. For those who were still in jobs, work intensity increased during this period. To Zerzan, however, the most important thing, was a decline of the work-ethic. Zerzan also dismissed strikes (successful or otherwise) as being cathartic charades. His focus on attitudes allowed the perilous state of the proletariat as a movement to be overlooked.

Zerzan's unrealistic optimism is merely the flipside of the pessimism that comes with defeat.<sup>11</sup> But holding on to such ideas - substituting the simple negation of civilization for the determinate negation of capitalism - is not only a reflection of pessimism with current movements; it also functions to prevent adherents from connecting with these movements. The ultimate test of the primitivists' case might be its usefulness in struggles. Primitivists say they don't want to 'simply' go back (maybe they want to go back in a more 'complex' way - in a tardis, perhaps), but neither do they say much about what we should be doing now; and Perlman and Zerzan give few examples of collective struggles that seem to them to point in the right direction.<sup>12</sup> In the past, Perlman and Zerzan made contributions to revolutionary struggle; but whatever useful contributions Zerzan may make now do not particularly seem to flow from his theory.

For the modern primitivist, the despair of failing to locate the future in the present, and of failing to counteract the pervasiveness of production, may leave no alternative but principled suicide (possibly in the service of a bombing mission against one or other manifestation of the 'mega-machine'), or resignation before Leviathan's irresistible progress, and a search for an individual solution. Although primitivists see capital as a social relation, they seem to have lost the sense that it is a process of class struggle, not just an imposition by a powerful oppressor. Since, in their account, *all* praxis is alienated, how can proletarian praxis possibly offer the way out? So, for example, George Bradford, writing in *Fifth Estate*,<sup>13</sup> argues that all we can hope to do is maintain human decency, affirm moral coherence and defend 'human personhood', and hope that others do the same.

## History produces its own questioners

The argument that the turn to primitivism reflects the limits of the class struggle at the present time has certain consequences for the coherence of the primitivist position. To say that primitives necessarily resisted civilization may be to project on to them the primitivist's own desires - specifically, her own antipathy to technology and 'civilized' (i.e. class) society. Primitives very likely were not conscious of their way of life as a possibility or choice in the way the modern primitivist is, and therefore would not have valued it in the same way that we might, and may not necessarily have resisted the development of the productive forces. The desire to transcend civilization seems itself to be a product of class society; the rosy view of pre-history is itself a creation of history.

The issue touches upon the definition of 'human nature'. In confronting this, we find two sorts of position in the writings of primitivists. Firstly, consistent with Marx's approach, some acknowledge that human needs and desires are indeed historical products.<sup>14</sup> But, for the logically pure primitivist, this is problematic because such needs and desires would therefore be an effect of the very thing they are trying to overcome; these needs would be part of history and civilization, and therefore alienated. (Recall the traditional leftist view that capitalism holds back our needs for technological progress; to the primitivist, needs like these would be part of the problem.)

Given this, primitivists often imply instead that the human needs and desires to which civilization is antithetical are ahistorical or suprahistorical.<sup>15</sup> Perlman says nothing explicit in his book about the precise features of this ahistorical human nature he seems to be positing, except that he 'take[s] it for granted that resistance is the natural human response to dehumanization' (p. 184). The rest, we can assume, is simply the negative of his account of civilization: non-hierarchical, non-working and so on.

Again, an ahistorical 'human nature' argument against capital ('civilization', 'government' etc.) is not a new one, and we don't have to re-invent the dialectical wheel to argue against it. In fact, we can turn to some of Perlman's own work for a pretty good counter-argument. In his Introduction to Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*,<sup>16</sup> Perlman discusses Feuerbach's conception of human nature. As Perlman says, for Feuerbach the human essence is something isolated, unhistorical and therefore abstract. The great leap in theory beyond the bourgeois idealists made by Marx was to argue against this that 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' (p. 122).<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, then, the later Perlman makes a huge leap backwards in theory to rediscover old, bourgeois notions which define human nature in terms of certain negative desires located within each individual.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Zerzan counterposes 'alienation' (be it through hierarchy, agriculture or wage labour) to an asocial humanity. His more promising early writing on absenteeism and sabotage was flawed by his inability to recognize the limits of struggle that does not become collective.<sup>19</sup> His more recent work centres on a critique of language, that aspect of human life which, probably more than any other, allows us to share and therefore makes us social beings.

Primitivists' conception of the essential ontological opposition as being between history (civilization) and an abstract human nature, instead of between two historically-contingent sets of *interests* (capital versus the proletariat), means that their critique tends to be merely a *moral* one. For example, as his widow and biographer states, Perlman argues that the trail-blazers of civilization did have other *choices*.<sup>20</sup> In

*Worker-Student Action Committees*, a similarly voluntaristic theme works as a useful critique of the limits of the practice of those taking part in the events in Paris in May 1968: 'Subjectively they thought they were revolutionaries because they thought a revolution was taking place ... They were not going to initiate this process; they were going to follow the wave wherever it pushed them.' (p. 82). But, in the absence of a proper recognition of the logical-historical drives and constraints of particular modes of production, Perlman's primitivism represents the degeneration of a non-objectivist version of Marxism into a version of the anarchist critique of power, with all its obvious weaknesses: 'These leaders were just bad or stupid people!' Similarly, in the case of Zerzan, language is said to have arisen not so that people could co-operate with each other, but 'for the purpose of lying' (*Elements of Refusal*, p. 27). So we must blame, not class interests, but people's moral failings!<sup>21</sup>

## Whose progress is it anyway?

Primitivists say little about variations and changes in climate in pre-historic times. In certain times and places, there may well have been societies like the idyll described by Perlman; but it is equally likely that other situations were nightmarish. All primitive societies relied completely on the benevolence of nature, something which could easily change; and changes in climatic conditions could wipe out thousands.

Bound up with the primitivist view of pre-history as an ideal state is the rigid distinction they draw between nature and human productive activity. What makes us human are the set of 'first order mediations' between *humanity and nature*: our needs, the natural world around us, our power to create, and so on. To be human is to be creative. Through 'second order mediations', these basic qualities of existence are themselves mediated by relationships - of power, alienation, exploitation and so on - between *classes*. Zerzan idealizes a golden age before humanity became distinct from nature only because he conflates human creative activity per se with alienated creative activity; to him, any human creative activity - any activity which affects the rest of nature - is already saturated with exploitation and alienation.

What the anti-civilization position overlooks, therefore, is the *mutual constitution* of humanity and (the rest of) nature: humans are part of nature, and it is their nature to humanize nature. Nature and humanity are co-defining parts of a single moving totality; both are therefore subject to change and change each other. Changes in the world may lead to new social relations among human beings - relations which may involve a different relation to that world, a different praxis and technology (such as when the Iron Age developed out of climatic changes). We are products of nature, but we also create ourselves through our own activity in shaping the world that we inhabit. While it is certainly true that to privilege 'humanity' in any of these changes may be to damage the very environment we need to live, to privilege 'the natural world' by viewing all our activity as an assault on it may be to damage humanity.

If the change from pre-history to agriculture and other innovations wasn't necessarily alienating - if the latter weren't by their nature imposed within and through social relations of domination - then the whole historical opposition Perlman and Zerzan set up between progress and its popular resistance is thrown into doubt. Evidence from history suggests that progress is by no means necessarily the expression of the powerful; rather the powerful were sometimes indifferent to progress, and the powerless were sometimes the ones who contributed to it.<sup>22</sup>

In Antiquity, particularly in Greek society, there was technological stagnation rather than progress. The surplus product of slave labour was used for innovations only in the sphere of civic society and the intellectual realm. Manual

labour, and therefore innovations in production, were associated in the minds of the Greek ruling class with loss of liberty. Although the Romans introduced more technical developments, these were largely confined to the material improvement of cities (e.g., central heating) and the armed forces (e.g., roads) rather than the forces of production. In both cases, military conquest was preferred to economic advance through the forces of production.

In the feudal period, both lords and peasants had reasons to bring innovations to agriculture to increase production. The growing desires for amenities and luxuries in the aristocratic class as a whole, particularly from about the year 1000 onwards, motivated an expansion of supply from the countryside. Hence the introduction of the water-mill and the spread of viticulture. The peasants were motivated to create and satisfy new needs by the particular parameters of the feudal mode of production, which tied the peasant to only a certain weekly toll and fixed number of days to work: the rest of the time was their own, and could be used to improve their quality of life. Hence more and more villages came to possess forges for local production of iron tools; cereal cultivation spread; and the quality and quantity of production on the peasants' own plots increased.

The key to understanding the massive growth in productivity in the feudal period, however, was the recurrent rent struggles between peasants and landowners. Disputes over land, initiated by either pole of the feudal relationship, motivated occupation and colonization of new lands in the form of reclamation of heaths, swampland and forests for agricultural purposes. It was a continual class struggle that drove the economy forward.

Primitivism, by suggesting that the initiators of progress are always the ruling class, projects features of capitalism back into the past - as do most bourgeois theories. Previous class societies were based largely on a settled level of technology; in such societies technological change may have been resisted by the ruling classes since it might have upset settled relations of dominance. Capitalism is the only mode of production based on constantly revolutionizing technology and the means of production.

Moreover, characterizing capitalism as simply the rule of technology or the 'mega-machine' fetishizes fixed capital as a prime mover, thereby losing sight of the struggle behind the shape of the means of production. Progress within capitalism is characteristically the result of capital responding to forms of resistance. For example, in the shift to Taylorist production methods, the variables that the management scientists were having to deal with were not merely technical factors but the awkwardness and power of the workforce; this could best be controlled and harnessed as variable capital (so the scientists thought) by physically separating the job of work into its component parts and the workers along the production line so they were unable to fraternize. One of the next steps in improving output was the introduction of the 'human relations' approach, putting a human face on the factory, which was forced upon capital by worker resistance (in the form of absenteeism and sabotage) to the starkness of pure Taylorism.

Thus, we might understand progress in the forces of production not as the absolute imposition of the will of one class over another, but as the result of the class contradiction itself. If progress is in an important sense a compromise, a result of conflict - both between classes and between competing capitals - then some of its effects might be positive. We might hate capitalism, but most of us can think of capitalist technologies we'd like to keep to meet our present and future needs (though not as commodities, of course) - be it mountain bikes, light bulbs or word processors. This is consistent with our immediate experience of modern capitalism which isn't simply imposed upon us monolithically, but has to reflect our own wishes in some way. After all, isn't the essence of the spectacle the

recuperation of the multiplicity of our own desires? Therefore it is not some abstract progress which we want to abolish, but the contradictory progress we get in class society. The process of communism entails the reappropriation and radical, critical transformation of that created within the alienated social relations of capitalism. To hold that the problem is essentially technology itself is a mystification; human instruments are not out of our control within capitalism because they are *instruments* (any more than *our own hands* are necessarily out of our control), but because they are the instruments of *capital* - and therefore of reified, second-order mediations.

Given all this, the argument by Wildcat<sup>23</sup> - that IF the productive forces need to be developed to a sufficient degree to make communism possible, and IF these forces are *not* developed sufficiently now, THEN revolutionaries might have to support their further development - applies only to Marxist objectivism rather than to the version of Marx's project we are trying to develop. At any time, the revolutionary supports the opposition to capital (and, by extension, takes the side of any communist tendency in any class society). Actions by the opposition to capital can force concessions from capital, making further successful resistance possible both subjectively (confidence, ideas of possibility etc.) and objectively (pushing capital beyond itself, weakening its mechanisms of control etc.). 'Progress' often describes the deferment of this revolutionary process, as the mode of production is forced to change its form: look at the way the class compromise of the post-war settlement entailed the development of new production and accumulation methods in the form of Fordism. In their attack on progress, Wildcat mistake the shadows for the substance of the fight.

#### Good and bad Marx

Perlman and Camatte certainly knew their Marx, and developed their early, more promising, revolutionary theory through a confrontation with him. But *Against His-story* and much of Zerzan's work recommend no such constructive confrontation; rather they encourage a simplistic and dismissive attitude by characterizing Marx as merely a nineteenth century advocate of progress. From that perspective, any apparently radical critique of Marx is welcomed, including that of postmodernist scumbags like Baudrillard. (*The Mirror of Production*, a book by the media darling and recuperator of situationist ideas, which groups Marx with the rest of the 'modernist' has-beens, is promoted in the primitivist-influenced *Fifth Estate* periodical.)

A critique of Marx and Marxism is certainly necessary, but primitivism (like postmodernism) is merely the ideologization of such a critique. The anti-civilization position is not just a necessary attack on leftism, but a counter-productive attack on everything in Marx. In defending some version of Marx against primitivism, we certainly need to acknowledge the problems in attempting to separate from some of its own consequences a theory which sought not merely to interpret the world but to change it. However, some of the primitivist critics seem to simply fit Marx up rather than attempt to understand some of the limitations of his theory. For example, Zerzan's critique of Marx claims to link Marx's practice with the supposed problems of this theory. But the critique consists almost entirely of a list of Marx's personal shortcomings and says virtually nothing about his theory.<sup>24</sup>

At least Wildcat bother to dig out some quotes from Marx, which they then use as evidence in a critique of (their reading of) Marx's theory. From the *Grundrisse*, they find a quote to show that Marx thought that capitalist progress and thus alienation was a necessary step to the full development of the individual;<sup>25</sup> and from the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* they quote Marx's well-known statement declaring that the development of the productive forces is the precondition for communism.<sup>26</sup> These kinds of



## Aufheben

theoretical statements they link to Marx's failings in practice, in particular his support for the American Civil War. In response, we might pick out a dozen more quotes from different texts by Marx - or even from the same texts *Wildcat* draw upon - to show the importance he placed on proletarian subjectivity and self-activity; and we might link these with his important and innovative contributions to revolutionary practice, such as his support for the Silesian uprising and the Paris Commune.

But a mere selection (or even an aggregation) of quotes from Marx is not an analysis. If we think there is anything useful in Marx's work, we could try to locate his limits and contradictions in their historical context rather than in the person of Marx in abstraction.<sup>27</sup> As Debord argued, Marx's limits and contradictions reflect those of the workers' movement of the time. The economic element in Marx's theory - exemplified in writings such as *Capital* - was merely one facet of his project as a whole. When the struggle appeared to be at its most promising, the totality and hence the subjective came to the fore in Marx's theory (as in the case of the overall content and direction of the *Grundrisse*); but in the face of setbacks Marx was reduced to scientific justifications. It was also important rhetorically, of course, to foresee the inevitability of the communist revolution in the maturation of capitalism (as in *The Communist Manifesto*, for example). Understanding Marx this way allows us to critically develop his revolutionary theory in the direction of communism rather than leading us simply to dump it as a whole uncritically.<sup>28</sup>

In an important sense, Marx was simply describing his observation that the development of the forces of production in the end brought communism closer through the proletarianization of the population. It is also true that at times he was an advocate of such development. But the main point is that such advocacy of capitalist progress does *not* flow from his theoretical premises in the clear cut way the primitivists would have us believe. Productivism is one trajectory from his work; this is the one taken up by the Soviet Marxists and other objectivists in their narrow, scientific reading. But, taking his project as a whole, Marx's theory also points to the active negation of capital through thoroughgoing class struggle on all fronts.

### Theory, history and future

In approaches to history, there is an important difference between looking to it for a communist ideal and attempting to understand why previous communist tendencies have failed - and thus why we have more chance than the Luddites, millenarian peasants, classical workers' movement etc. But in order to go beyond these previous tendencies, we also need to interrogate the present and the future. What new developments in technology call forth new unities within the working class? Do changes to the means of communication enable those engaged in struggles to understand and act more effectively upon their global significance?

To grasp present trends, we need more than the radical anthropology offered by primitivists. We need theory that allows us to understand the historical specificity of struggles. Capitalism is the most dynamic of class societies; the proletariat is the only revolutionary class that seeks to abolish itself and all classes. There are therefore many features of the present epoch of class struggle that are lost in the simple gloss 'civilization'. In order to struggle effectively, to understand the possible directions of struggles and the limits of particular ideologies within struggles, we need to develop - not reject - the categories Marx derived to grasp the capital relation and the process of its negation.

'Primitivism' is itself a product of a particular period of capitalist history. The same setbacks that have encouraged

postmodernism among radicals in the academic realm have helped produce primitivism in circles of activists. One merely describes 'the end of history', the other actively calls for such an end; both are an inverted form of liberal idealism which reject the traditional liberal faith in capitalist progress.

However, if primitivism was, like postmodernism, simply a complacent expression by well-paid academics of the defeat of industrial class struggles then we wouldn't bother giving it space in these pages. All of us are forced to make a response to increased pollution and environmental destruction brought about by the growth of the alien-power that is capital; primitivism is, at best, an attempt to engage in struggles around these kind of issues. The alarming and compelling new appearance of the fundamental problematic of alienation, in the form of worldwide environmental destruction for profit, has encouraged new forms of resistance (particularly in the U.S.A.), and these new forms seek ideas. Marxism, identified with the old forms (of both capital and its resistance), is seen to fail in the eyes of this new wave of resisters - hence the appeal of a radical alternative, such as primitivism. But the problem of primitivism lies in a flawed diagnosis of the problem of Marxism: the essential problem in Marx and Marxism is not the belief in *progress*, but *objectivism*.<sup>29</sup> A revolutionary theory adequate to the struggle needed at the present time must therefore start with a critique of the objectivism of previous revolutionary theories.<sup>30</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Worker-Student Action Committees*, p. 85. Detroit: Black & Red.
- <sup>2</sup> *Wildcat* 17, Spring 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> The argument is based on M. Sahlins's (1974) *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock), which suggests that stone age types had 'what they wanted' in abundance.
- <sup>4</sup> *Against His-story*, p. 18.
- <sup>5</sup> If 'overpopulation' by human beings is seen as the problem, the solution might be to call for the annihilation of 99.99% of the human race to return the other 0.01% to the state of nature, a rather problematic conclusion for someone who is supposed to be on the side of the human race against Leviathan: for, after all, who will decide who should make up the privileged 0.01%?
- <sup>6</sup> J. Zerzan (1988). *Elements of Refusal*. Seattle: Left Bank Books.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Zerzan (1994). *Future Primitive and Other Essays*. New York: Autonomedia.
- <sup>8</sup> The historians E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill are prime examples of people who, because of the separation of past from present, are/were able to pursue a revolutionary historiography within academia alongside a merely reformist political practice.
- <sup>9</sup> Lorraine Perlman (1989). *Having Little, Being Much. A Chronicle of Fifty Years of the Fifty Years*. Detroit: Black & Red, p. 91.
- <sup>10</sup> See *The Refusal of Work*, *Exchanges* at Movement (1979).
- <sup>11</sup> *Wildcat*'s position too seems to be tied up with a pessimism that comes from the low point of the struggle: 'It is difficult at present to see how the New World Order of Madonna and MacDonald's (sic) contains its own negation' (*Wildcat* 17, p. 16). The all-or-nothing approach that is characteristic of varieties of ultra-leftism swings fixedly from unreasonable optimism to despair; when resistance is strong, it seems to make sense to see the proletariat as attempting always to express spontaneous revolutionary tendencies, which are hampered only by leftism and the unions. But when the resistance is defeated, there seems to be nothing left - hence the appeal of a diametrically opposite extreme position.
- <sup>12</sup> In the same way, Rousseau was aware that his moral critique of civilization did not point to any practical solution.
- <sup>13</sup> 'The Triumph of Capital' (*Fifth Estate*, Spring 1992).
- <sup>14</sup> 'Needs are created by human society, along with the means to satisfy them.' (*Wildcat* 17, p. 16).
- <sup>15</sup> Freud argued that the essence of civilization was the sublimation of (socially unacceptable) pre-existing drives. In seeing an opposition between civilization and the full and unadulterated expression of human desires, Perlman and Zerzan agree with Freud; the only difference is that Freud thought much of civilization was good. (S. Freud (1930). *Civilization and its discontents*. In A. Dickson (Ed., 1985). *Pelican Freud Library* 12. Harmondsworth: Penguin.)
- <sup>16</sup> I.I. Rubin (1972). *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. (Trans. M. Sgurdzija & F. Perlman). Detroit: Black & Red. (First published 1928).
- <sup>17</sup> Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in C. Arthur (Ed., 1974). *The German Ideology* (Student Edition). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

<sup>18</sup> An example of the drive to expand civilization and the productive forces being located in the psychology of individuals rather than in the totality of social relations comes in *Against His-story* when Perelman attributes 'the conquest of primitives by Europeans to the latter's "resentment" of those who seem to be free (p. 267).

<sup>19</sup> See the debate in *The Refusal of Work*.

<sup>20</sup> L. Perelman *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> The moral undertone in the critique of civilization resonates with the puritanically moral conceptions of human needs held by many eco-anarchist types, who tell their comrades that the latter 'don't really need' some of the things they desire, and who attempt to specify to them 'all the things we really need' - usually a spartan list reflecting historically-contingent notions of 'biological necessities'.

<sup>22</sup> Descriptions based on Perry Anderson (1974), *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, (London: NLB).

<sup>23</sup> *Wildcat* 17, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> 'The practical Marx' (1979) in *Elements of Refusal*. The style seems typical of Zerzan whose articles are frequently made up of a collection of quotes and empirical snippets with little analysis.

<sup>25</sup> *Wildcat* 17, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> The irony of Zerzan's pseudo-critique is that he could find legitimate reason for making a valid criticism of Marx simply by opening Volume I of *Capital* where the Luddites are dismissed as 'reactionary'. Marx contradicts himself in the 'missing sixth chapter' of the same volume ('Results of the Immediate Process of Production') by characterizing technology not as a neutral object but as the very agent of the worker's alienation and therefore a proper target of rational class hatred.

<sup>28</sup> On this point of developing Marx using Marx's method, see G. Debord (1967), *The Society of the Spectacle*, (London: Practical Paradise Publications), A. Negri (1984), *Marx beyond Marx*, (New York: Autonomedia) and F.C. Shortall (1994), *The Incomplete Marx*, (Aldershot: Avebury). It is true that the question of ecology which concerns primitivists remains neglected even in these relatively recent developments. Again, however, it is only by understanding the historical context of this neglect in Marx and others that we might develop revolutionary theory instead of merely counterposing it to an ecological approach.

<sup>29</sup> The primitivist George Bradford suggests that the only way that capital and the mega-machine will be destroyed is through the weight of their own complexity - in other words through an objective process of decline. A mere critique of 'progress' is an inadequate critique of objectivism (and hence an inadequate grasp of the subjective) and so reproduces further objectivism.

<sup>30</sup> See 'Decadence' article in this issue and *Aufheben* 2 and 3.



#### Aufheben

(past tense: *hob auf* ; p.p. *aufgehoben* ; noun: *Aufhebung* ).

Aufheben has no English equivalent. In popular German it normally has two main meanings which are in opposition. One is negative, 'to abolish', 'to annul', 'to cancel' etc. The other is positive, 'to supersede', 'to transcend'. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning and used the word to describe the positive-negative action whereby a higher form of thought or nature supersedes a lower form, while at the same time 'preserving' its 'moments of truth'. The proletariat's revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this positive-negative movement of supersession, as is its theoretical realisation in Marx's method of critique.

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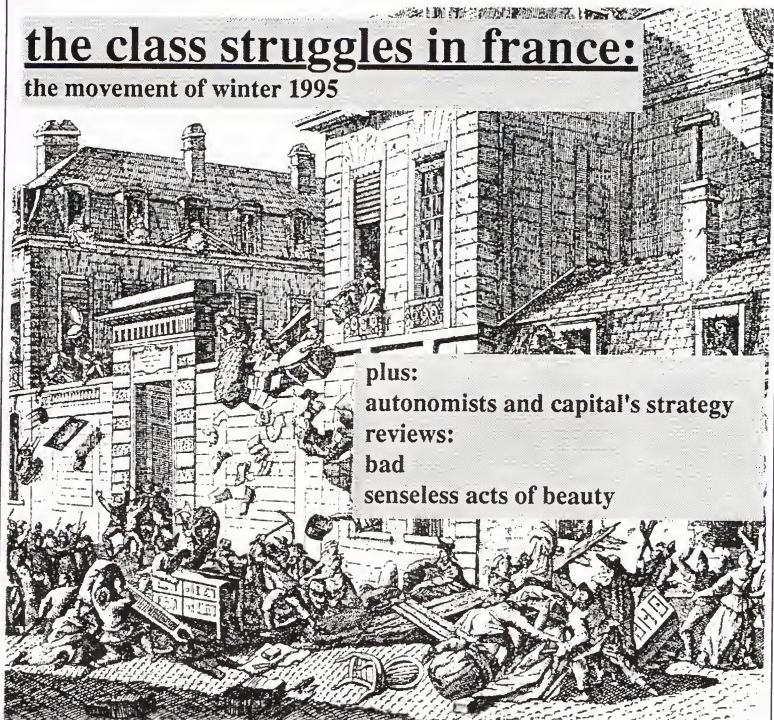
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# Aufheben

## the class struggles in france:

the movement of winter 1995



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Last year's social upheaval in France was one of the most significant moments in European class struggle for decades. This Editorial Introduction provides the international and historical background to our *Intakes* documents from the French events. We begin with the context of drives towards European integration, and then analyse the changing forms of class struggle in France in the last 50 years, including the 1986 riots, the '86-7 rail strike, the Air France rebellion in 1993, and the winter crisis of '95 itself.

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### Intakes:

#### 'Together we can invent a future'

Our *Intakes* section in this issue comprises articles and leaflets written by participants in the 1995 winter crisis and translated from French. The first six documents were mostly produced as leaflets at the time, and describe and analyse the developing criticisms and desires among sections of the movement. The remaining three pieces are articles written at the end of the wave of strikes and demonstrations, in January 1996. They reflect upon some of the radical tendencies and limits of the movement, and provide a vivid account of the solidarity, creativity and conflict experienced by railworkers and others.

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# The Class Struggles in France

Editorial Introduction to articles on the 1995 winter crisis in France

Two million on the streets burning Roman candles, waving red and black banners, and singing the *Internationale*... A strike, spreading like wildfire from one sector to another through rank and file delegations... Daily assemblies open to all... Occupations... The switching of electricity onto cheap-rate by striking workers... Rioting coal miners... Shock waves reverberating throughout Europe, echoes in Germany and Belgium... And a feeling that anything is possible..... And yet. A movement initiated by the unions. Peaceful demonstrations policed by the unions. Limited extension of the strike beyond the public sector. Silence in the *banlieue*. An agreement negotiated by the unions. A return to work called by the unions. Central demands not met. And the postponement once more of hopes for real social change.....



These contradictory appearances of last year's social upheaval in France make an analysis imperative. There is little doubt that the movement was one of the most significant moments in European class struggle for decades. The working class of France once again assumed a central role in the international amphitheatre of class conflict. In 1968 it launched perhaps the most advanced - if not the most enduring - assault on the post-war settlement. In 1995 the working class of France mounted the biggest challenge to date against European capital's attempts to destroy that same settlement and liberate capital from its institutionalized commitments to working class needs.

Around five million workers were on strike for the mass demonstration on December 12th, while a quarter of a million were on indefinite strike throughout the duration of the movement. This easily dwarfs the numbers involved in any struggles in France since '68. And whilst ten million were involved in the general strike of that year, the movement of '95 saw more people demonstrating, and more often, than did that of '68. More than two million took to the streets for the biggest demonstrations.

Was the movement autonomous? Or was it merely a trade union affair? It would be impossible to answer these questions in absolute terms. The realities of class struggle are riven with complicating contradictions even if 'revolutionaries' often see things in black and white:

**The struggles have raised echoes of the great movements of 1936 and 1968 and have placed the power of the working class firmly back on the agenda.** (*Socialist Review*, Monthly review of Socialist Workers Party, January 1996)

In reality the French proletariat is the target of a massive manoeuvre aimed at weakening its consciousness and combativity; a manoeuvre, moreover, which is also aimed at the working class in other countries, designed at making it draw the wrong lessons from the events in France. (*International Review*, 85, Quarterly journal of the International Communist Current, 1996)

The trade unions played a major role in the movement. Union militants, with the approval of their leaders, pushed for the extension of the strike from its initial base and encouraged the setting up of assemblies. On the other hand these assemblies, consisting of union members and non-union members alike, controlled the day to day affairs of the movement and initiated most of what was exciting about the movement. Localized autonomy was one of its key features.

In this issue of *Aufheben* we include as *Intakes* a number of leaflets and articles translated from French in order to provide documentation of this important movement. The documents we reproduce here help us to appreciate the current state of class struggle in France. However, on their own these documents are not enough. They do not explain to readers outside France how the French working class has arrived at this juncture. In this Editorial Introduction we will therefore try to illuminate these events in the light of their international and historical contexts. We need to be able to appreciate last year's movement in relation to the struggles which have preceded it and those which may follow. Our attempt to place the French events in context has inevitably been limited by the problem of the restricted availability of translated material, which may have led to a certain imbalance in the importance we have placed on, and detail we have given on, some struggles while others have been neglected. This imbalance will hopefully be corrected in the future by the increased availability of further translated texts on the recent class struggles in France.

The class struggle in France, whilst occurring within specific geopolitical boundaries, does not however take place separately to those in the rest of the world. Its parameters are determined by forces which exert themselves globally and to which nation states are tending towards responding supra-nationally. It is necessary to place the events of last year in relation to the context of European integration.



## (A) The European Context

## (i) Maastricht and all that

The leader of the French Communist Party (PCF) denounced the government's call for a clamp down on the budget deficit as 'lining up with Chancellor Kohl' of Germany, a move which 'raised questions for France and its sovereignty'. In response to this and other explanations which blame 'Maastricht and all that' for everything, it has been pointed out that the austerity measures implemented by the French government last November were required to assuage the needs of French capital regardless of 'foreign policy' considerations. Indeed much of the pressure for action came from factions in the French capitalist class who are opposed to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

becomes objectified in its labour-intensive industries, through shifting investment away from its own highly paid workers towards those in Korea and other Pacific NICs. Since the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, capital in Western Europe has increasingly come to recognize that confronting its working class in order to be able to compete with the emerging blocs of the Japanese Pacific and the US-dominated Americas will similarly require a continental territorial perspective.

The process of European integration has proceeded at a pace unimaginable during the years when global geo-politics were dominated by cold war rivalry. By 1999, proletarians in Europe will not only sell their labour power in a unified market, but could well



The international dimensions of the situation cannot be ignored, however. The French economy is locked into the global circuits of capital and therefore obliged to play by the rules. Soon after their ascendancy in May '95, President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé sacked a minister who had pushed for action on the budget deficit. The result was pressure on the franc in the international money markets and panic in the French government. After the announcement of the 'Juppé plan', stock prices stabilized and the franc recovered. All the talk at the moment about the *ideology of neo-liberalism* obscures the fact that it refers to the *political expression of the real imperatives of capital*. The global autonomy of finance capital subordinates all would-be masters of capital to its dictates - never before has the alienation of the capitalist been so apparent.

Faced with this tidal wave which threatens to wash away all the messy compromises of the past, the French bourgeoisie clearly intends to cling to the life raft of European integration. Twenty-odd years of rationalization has still left European capital with a competitive disadvantage compared to the US or Japan. Whilst European capital faces an entrenched working class, doggedly clinging on to the concessions wrought from capital during the post-war boom, capital in the US has been able to outflank the battalions of organized labour by shifting investment away from the 'rust belt' industries of the North and East towards the flexible labour of 'sunrise' industries in the South and West. Likewise, Japanese capital has been able to reduce the value of the labour-power, which

find it confronted with and bought by money with a single face, the imaginatively named Euro. The working class of Europe is becoming increasingly unified, but only behind our backs, through our alienated labour becoming increasingly integrated into the social abstract labour which is European capital. This contains an inherent possibility, which can be realized only through re-appropriating our activity as struggle: that of the political recomposition of the proletariat across the continent. But whilst this possibility remains as yet unrealized, the cycles of struggle which have occurred over the last few years have proved that the entrenchment of the working class throughout Europe poses a significant problem for the project of EMU. It cannot proceed if any of the central players, particularly France or Germany, fail to meet the convergence criteria. Moreover, the signal such a failure would send to the international money markets would lead to serious repercussions.

The formation of a single currency is conditional upon nation states being able to impose upon their subjects the strict criteria for EMU agreed upon at Maastricht. Meeting the targets for public spending (below 60 per cent of GDP) and national debt (below three per cent of GDP) require significant attacks upon the social wage and strenuous efforts to hold down wage levels. It is against this backdrop that the 'Juppé plan' must be viewed. Class struggle throughout the continent is now mediated by political decisions made at the European level - the Maastricht Treaty has given the general requirement for austerity: quantitative targets to be achieved within a specific timetable. The gauntlet has been thrown down.

The Maastricht Treaty also aims to introduce 'liberalization' and 'competitiveness' to areas of 'state monopoly' such as post and telecommunications, transport and energy. A 1990 European directive liberalized telecommunications, with state monopolies due to end in 1998; a 1991 rail transport decree (which became law in France in 1995) separates management of rail infrastructure and access to the system, allowing private rail companies access to the rail network maintained by public funds; a 1993 agreement frees up internal rail travel; while the next area for 'liberalization' will be energy, where major consumers will be able to buy power from the supplier of their choice while using existing infrastructure to deliver it. Whilst such measures simply reflect the existing situation on the ground in the UK, they clearly have strong implications for France, the most state-dominated economy in the EU.

#### (ii) Working class opposition

The winter crisis in France was not the first to result directly from measures aimed at achieving the targets for EMU (or, perhaps more accurately in this case, reassuring the money markets that these targets will be achieved). Strikes and mass demonstrations have been seen in virtually every European country over the last few years. These movements have created significant problems for the national bourgeoisies of continental Europe. But, excepting recent events in France for the time being, those that stand out occurred in Germany and then Italy in 1992. The strike wave in both Eastern and Western Germany in the spring of 1992 wrecked hopes that unification would instrumentally undermine the power of the German working class, and further strikes in 1993, 1995 and 1996 have left German qualification for EMU on a knife-edge. Indeed much depends on whether the sweeping welfare cuts announced in April this year, aimed at slashing £22 billion from public spending by reducing sick pay and pensions and eroding employee protection laws, can be carried out in the face of concerted union opposition.

Whilst national union federations throughout Europe have been mobilizing opposition to austerity, there can however be little doubt that they remain generally committed to the well being of 'their' capitals and sympathetic towards European integration, if a little dismayed that the price to be paid for the Social Chapter is subordination to Europe's bankers. And the problem remains that, on the whole, these struggles have occurred within a strict union framework. The apparent exception was the movement in Italy against the Amato plan in autumn 1992. This autumn budget

comprised a freeze on public sector recruitment and wage negotiations, the abolition of health care for 66 per cent of families, and the imposition of new taxes on houses. Spontaneous strikes broke out in many factories in response. The reaction to these measures combined with anger towards the trade unions because of an agreement they had signed with the government at the end of July abolishing the *scala mobile*, a mechanism for partial wage protection against inflation. This agreement had been signed whilst most workers were on holiday, in order to avoid an immediate backlash. The trade unions called for regional general strikes, and three million public sector workers took strike action. But when trade union leaders addressed rallies they were met with exemplary expressions of anger. In Florence, Milan and Turin, union speakers at rallies were pelted with rotten vegetables, bolts and ball-bearings, whilst huge demonstrations in Naples, Bologna, Bari, Genova, Parma, Padova, Venezia, Taranto, Brescia and Bergamo saw similar outbursts of anger directed at the unions. Alternative rallies and demonstrations were held, the COBAS providing the necessary autonomous organization. The limits of this movement were exposed by the simple fact that, in terms of scrapping the proposed measures or exacting concessions from the government, it achieved practically nothing. The militants of the COBAS remained marginal with respect to the mass of workers still loyal to the unions. Italian unions have ridden this storm and retained control over the working class. The demonstration in Rome in 1994, the biggest in Italy since the Second World War, was essentially under trade union control. Nevertheless, the struggles in Italy in 1992, 1993 and 1994 will almost certainly mean that the Italian bourgeoisie will be unable to satisfy the convergence criteria for EMU in the foreseeable future.

But what of France? French qualification for EMU is also in the balance, but the whole project would need to be completely reappraised if the French bourgeoisie fails to meet the requirements. Last year's movement certainly came close to wrecking France's chances and following the end of last year's movement there was a strong feeling in France that the working class was not defeated and would mobilize again if provoked. But it is also necessary to look at this whole situation from another angle - that of the proletariat and its potential transnational, antagonistic recomposition. We must turn our attention to the major battles in the class war in France over the last few years and the light they throw onto last year's events.



## Part I: 1945-1986

**A short note on French trade unions**

A short preamble to this section is required to explain the difference between trade unionism in France and in the UK. Less than ten per cent of French workers belong to a trade union at present, an extremely low figure representing a decline in membership throughout the 1980s. For example, the membership of the CGT in 1994 was only a third of that in 1977. But this low level of membership can be misleading. The influence of French trade unions is far greater than the figures suggest, as it derives from their legal and institutional positions in the state organized system of works councils, '*comités d'entreprise*'. All workplaces over a minimal size have a works council in which the workers are represented. As well as being responsible for running facilities such as canteens, sporting activities, clubs etc., these works councils have rights to information regarding the profitability and future plans of the enterprise. This institutionalized social partnership extends all the way to the top, with, for example, meetings in which representatives from all of the councils in each Renault plant will sit around the table with the top management.

Union members and non-members alike vote in works council elections, so non-membership in France involves none of the consequences that it can in the UK. Indeed, to become a member of a trade union in France is quite a different thing to signing up in the UK where it is a relatively apolitical act of combination. In France it is an explicitly political act, nailing one's colours to the flag of the particular union federation's political affiliations. The CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*), the largest, is explicitly the PCF's union federation, whilst FO (*Force Ouvrière*) resulted from an anti-Soviet cold war split from the CGT, and the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique Du Travail*) is closely linked to the Socialist Party (PS). Of course, the CGT has changed a great deal of late, as at least one of the *Intakes* articles reproduced here points out, due to the historic waning of Stalinist influence throughout Western Europe, although it seemed impervious to the wave of 'euro-communist revisionism' for years. Other unions have emerged to complicate the picture, including the SUD, which resulted from the expulsion from the CFDT of postal service members deemed too militant.

**(i) Liberation**

As was the case elsewhere, many of the welfare commitments which capital has subsequently tried to rescind were granted in the aftermath of World War Two. The *Conseil National de Résistance* (CNR) drew up a programme, even before the Normandy invasions, for nationalization and social security, and for the direct involvement of the unions in processes of planning and the joint administration of social security.<sup>9</sup> Following its patriotic role in the resistance, the PCF subsequently gained the largest proportion of votes in the 1945 Constituent Assembly elections and formed a tripartite government with the Socialists and the Christian Democrats. As a matter of the survival of French capitalism, all parties were committed to nationalization (in order to prevent social revolution), consensus (rather than class war), and the modernization of France along Keynesian lines in order to prevent a return to the crises of the 1930s.

Building on the measures introduced by the Vichy government, the Popular Front and before, a national planning mechanism was established, state education was extended to the age of eighteen, and women were given the vote. A number of key nationalizations were enacted, including the coal, electricity and gas industries, Renault, Air France, Paris transport, the four main deposit banks, 34

insurance companies, press agencies, press printing shops and distribution companies, radio stations and navigation companies. A law subsequently established the '*comités d'entreprise*', giving the unions special privileges in elections to them. In October 1946, the right to strike was recognized in principle; moreover, a special status was established for national and local government employees, laying down recruitment and promotion procedures, pension rights and elected joint administrative committees.

The widespread destruction resulting from the war, whilst providing the long term basis for the profitable reconstruction of industry along fordist lines, had left the economy in tatters. Food shortages, low wages and overcrowded insanitary accommodation led to widespread discontent in 1947. Investment in the form of OECD funds provided by the Marshall Plan served to stave off the immediate threat of communism, or at least the real threat of French alignment with the Soviet Union, forcing the PCF into opposition and locking the French economy into the circuits of industrial capital policed by the US. The CGT launched a wage offensive, triggering national general strikes of railway workers, miners and bank employees in the summer of '47 and the Marseilles general strike and factory occupations that November and December. In 1948 an eight week long national miners' strike ended in defeat when a number of miners were killed, thousands were imprisoned and the army occupied the coalfields. But concessions played a role alongside repression. A national minimum wage was introduced along with generalized insurance against unemployment, and urban renewal saw the tearing down of the festering shanty towns which were breeding working class antagonism, gradually replacing them with new suburban estates or *banlieue*.

These new *banlieue* provided the dormitories for the new working class concentrations, predominantly immigrants (many from North Africa but with significant numbers from Europe and the rest of Africa) rather than internal migrants, required to rebuild the French economy. The modernization of French agriculture was initially delayed in the post-war era, restricting the number of internal migrants available for the rapid modernization of French industry. The rural population did however decline from 35 per cent of the total to six per cent in 1990, whilst the number of students increased tenfold between 1950 and 1980. Rising labour productivity provided the basis for a modern fordist economy.<sup>10</sup> The production of relative surplus-value, dependent on the application of the mental labour of science to the transformation of labour processes, allowed for relatively stable capital accumulation<sup>11</sup> along with expanded consumption for the working class.

**(ii) May '68**

May '68 didn't come out of nowhere, unless one was looking for the prior existence of a revolutionary party, or for a major economic crisis. The successful accumulation of alienated labour posited as its opposite the accumulation of frustration and hostility. The resultant proletarian offensive which rocked Paris and the world remains one of the essential reference points for revolutionaries searching beyond the horizons of the old workers' movement in search of the richness of the project for the fully developed social individual.

As such the revolt deserves to be re-examined carefully. This introduction is not however the place to undertake such an examination - space does not permit it.<sup>12</sup> We will have to confine ourselves instead to the briefest of summaries, delineating the two phases of the movement and the separation between them that enabled the counter-revolution to emerge victorious.

The 'student movement' was from the start a movement against the role of the student, developing from a reaction against the use to which power put knowledge in Vietnam to become a conscious



desire to abolish the separation of ideas from practice and ideas of separation.<sup>11</sup> In conquering the territory of the university, it had become a movement in which students were a minority and in which the very category of student was being left behind with the division of labour. Through occupying and *socializing* the university, destroying the separate roles of thinker and worker, it had temporarily abolished it.

### (iii) Recession, Austerity and Resistance

#### (a) Stage 1

The costs of containing such an overt challenge to the rule of capital and preventing such developments elsewhere only served to compound the squeeze on profit rates which were falling globally. Along with those of the rest of Western Europe and the US, the French economy plunged into recession, particularly following the



This occupations movement was revolutionary in both form and content - the discovery of new ways of living dependent on the full participation of all involved. The situation became a genuinely revolutionary one, however, only when ten million workers went on wildcat strike and occupied the factories, thereby posing the decisive question of control of the means of material as well as ideological production. Those who had seized control over the means of production of specialized knowledge,<sup>12</sup> however, posited the same separation in the factory that they were abolishing in the university. Calls for the formation of *workers'* councils were issued to the *workers*. Unlike in the university, the task of seizing control of, transforming, socializing and thereby abolishing the factory was to be the prerogative of those who had been condemned to that particular prison by *capital's* social division of labour. The workers were expected to carry out the revolution in 'their' factories. But in the era of the real subsumption of labour to capital it is only leftists who self-identify with the alienated role of 'the worker'. The vast majority of workers remained uninspired by the ideology of self-management. Nor had they discovered a need for communism through struggle. Unwilling to make a history which was not their own yet not ready to make their own history, the workers of France delegatized.

The CGT controlled the factory occupations, stitched up what passed for councils or assemblies, and locked the gates against the revolutionary tide. There was no organized challenge to the CGT stranglehold - that would have to wait until 1986. In sharp contrast to the active nature of the strike in '95, the strikers largely remained the passive observers of the passing of an opportunity. The CGT negotiated the return of the factories in exchange for wage increases, and many never recovered from having to return to the old world when the new had seemed so possible.

oil price hike in 1973 which saw increased inflation, balance of trade problems, the halving of growth rates and rising unemployment. Despite the fact that the Gaullists remained in power, the response was that of 'social reform', including an increase in tax on capital and increased social security. In 1976 however unemployment topped one million and inflation was becoming rampant. An austerity package was imposed by the incoming prime minister Raymond Barre in an attempt to reduce wage inflation and curb public spending. Despite a one day stoppage in protest, social security contributions were increased and a wage freeze was imposed. The second oil shock of 1979-80 pushed unemployment over 1.6 million.

The reimposition of material poverty for the 'surplus population', amongst whom immigrants were disproportionately represented, led to insecurity for those still in work, resulting in a gradual decline in the confidence and combativity of the French working class. There was rioting after a striking steel workers' demo in Paris in 1979, but this was to be the last such riot in central Paris until 1986. And the one day strikes in 1976 marked the beginning of a long decline in the number of days lost (reclaimed) through strikes, a decline that continued all the way through the 1980s (with a slight blip in 1982 and 1988) and 1990s until it was arrested in the strike wave of last year.

#### (b) Stage 2

At the same time as right-wing leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan were coming to power in the Anglo-Saxon world with explicit mandates to tear up the post-war social democratic consensus and confront the organized power of the working class, the Socialist Party (PS) came to power in France with a Keynesian reflationary programme. A commitment to increase public spending was to be guaranteed by nationalizing the remaining private banks. President

Mitterrand, backed by a PS majority in the National Assembly and support from the PCF, aimed to create 55,000 public sector jobs, nationalizing aeronautics, electronics, chemicals and information technology companies, taking the state share of turnover from sixteen per cent to 30 per cent and public sector employment from eleven per cent to 24.7 per cent. Further measures designed to reduce unemployment included a reduction in the working week to 39 hours, an extra week of paid holidays, early retirement, and retraining for the unemployed. The national minimum wage was to be increased by ten per cent and family allowances boosted. All of this was topped off by a proposed tax on wealth and rhetoric about attacking the wealthy.<sup>13</sup>

The result was somewhat inevitable. The competitiveness of French companies declined whilst imports were sucked in, leading to inflationary and balance of payments problems. Capital took flight for pastures greener, and the franc had to be devalued three times in eighteen months as the global balance of class forces reasserted itself through the international money markets. The reform policy was put into reverse gear in 1982, with an initial wage and price freeze followed by wage restrictions in the public sector. Interest rates were cranked up to reimpose global disciplinary conditions upon French capital, taxation increased, welfare spending reduced, and wage indexation scrapped. The response to this dose of 'socialist austerity'<sup>14</sup> was a strike wave, but it was relatively weak and

certainly unable to counterbalance the pressure upon the French state from capital. Thus in 1984 the coal, steel and shipbuilding industries were all subjected to rationalization, resulting in a wave of redundancies. Other companies were encouraged to shed labour in pursuit of the increased exploitation of the remainder.

The French car industry was already engaged in the process of restructuring: introducing automation, shedding labour, running down certain plants and reorganizing the assembly line along neo-fordist lines in order to re-impose managerial control over the labour process.<sup>15</sup> The inability of previous concentrations of working class power to resist this restructuring, the extent to which the car worker had been fractured (particularly along 'racial' lines), and the confusion of labour at once antagonistic to capital and desperate not to be consigned to the scrap heap, were demonstrated by the pitched battles between workers at Talbot-Poissy in 1983.<sup>16</sup> Indeed a major element in the decline in strike activity from 1982 onwards has been the reluctance of private sector workers to strike, public sector workers being on average between half (1980s) and a third (1990s) more likely to strike than private sector workers.<sup>17</sup> But, notwithstanding this historic decline in the level of strike activity, there have been important developments in the class struggle, beginning with the bitter dispute of railway workers in the winter of 1986-7.



## Part II: 1986-1996

## (i) 1986: Riots Return to Central Paris

In electoral terms, the right-wing gained from the disillusionment of the working class with socialist austerity, although the experience may have played a part in the determination of railway workers in '86 to control their own dispute as the unions were tainted by their attachment to the PS-PCF government.<sup>18</sup> The 1983 municipal elections and 1984 European elections witnessed the rise of the National Front, which was supported by many PCF and Socialist Party officials in an attempt to split the right-wing vote. Indeed Mitterand changed the voting system for the 1986 National Assembly elections in order to boost the NF vote, but it was the conservative UDF (Union for French Democracy) and RPR (Rally for the Republic) which gained a majority, electing Chirac as Prime Minister to work alongside President Mitterand. Privatizations and deregulation (excluding those industries which had traditionally been in the public sector such as gas, electricity, aerospace and telecom), a reform of labour legislation to favour employers, and the refinancing of social security all formed important parts of his programme. But perhaps the most important element was the plan for outright repression of the unemployed second generation immigrant youth who constituted the '*beur*' movement.<sup>19</sup>

The 'first generation' of immigrants played an important role in the revolts of the 'mass worker', from the struggles over the assembly line to the rent strikes of the 'Sonacotra foyers' (hostels and living quarters where large numbers of migrants were housed) in the late 1970s. Marginalized by the processes of restructuring, the torch was handed on to the 'second generation' and their revolts in the early '80s, beginning in 1981 with the summer of rioting in Minguettes, the *banlieue* east of Lyons. Besides launching a cycle of urban revolt which has continued right up to the present day, the riot led to a number of initiatives to recuperate the *beurs'* struggle, beginning with the 1983 'March for Equality and Against Racism', which many young blacks and Arabs used as an opportunity to protest against racist attacks and violent police repression (despite their rejection of miserable institutional anti-racism), and ending with SOS-Racisme. This organization was launched by leftists with media blessing in 1985 with the express intention of regaining control over the *beur* movement and reducing it to a moralistic and non-violent media-oriented vehicle to integrate and destroy the real social movement and promote the re-election of Mitterand. Despite a certain degree of success initially, no doubt succeeding in preventing more riots than the cops, the organization rapidly began to lose its legitimacy in the *banlieue*, particularly after the movement had reasserted itself as a predominantly anti-police movement in the winter of '86.<sup>20</sup>

The '86 election had been won with a strong 'law and order' platform, aimed particularly at dealing with the *beurs*. Home Secretary Pasqua introduced a new policy against immigration and expelled 101 Malians on a charter flight, and legislation was passed by the new assembly to change the nationality laws so as to deny automatic French citizenship to kids born in France or to French parents. At the same time, the Devaquet Bill was passed, restricting what had previously been automatic and universal access to university for anyone with the *baccalauréat* (French equivalent of 'A' levels), a move which would have disproportionately affected those already discriminated against in other spheres. The spectre of terrorism, *intifada* and Islamic fanaticism was the cloak used by state terrorism, justifying routine harassment, searches and the like - and shootings. Cops were pulling out their guns and pointing them at black and Arab kids on a daily basis, on two occasions 'accidentally' killing drivers for going the wrong way down a one-way street. Years of repression and now this - *po* wonder that when the opportunity arose the situation exploded.<sup>21</sup>

From November 26th onwards, students began mobilizing against the Devaquet Bill, organizing meetings and demonstrating

peacefully. On the 4th of December, however, a concert to end a march at Invalides erupted into a riot with some 4,000 or so youths, mainly high school students, disrupting the show and fighting the cops, injuring 121. The following day, students gathered in the Latin Quarter to protest against police repression and proceeded to occupy the Sorbonne. Unlike in '68, however, non-students were excluded, and the whole affair served only to illustrate the extent to which students reflected the defensive nature of the times, having moved from a position of subverting their role to defending it. Later on, however, in the streets of the Latin Quarter the smashing up of a couple of shop windows and torching of a Porsche provoked the cops into attacking the crowd, killing Malik Oussekiné.

Despite the fact that the crowd naturally enough comprised many non-students just hanging out in the area, Malik Oussekiné was an Arab student. SOS-Racisme along with student bodies sought to exploit this incidental fact by excluding non-students from the funeral, outrageously proclaiming him one of 'their' dead. But since the riot on the 4th, the mobilizations had ceased to be simply student affairs in defence of the university but were seen by many as a vehicle for the expression of anger towards the police and the whole stinking system.<sup>22</sup> Many non-students turned up as well, and as the march passed near the 13th *arrondissement* police station, the CRS (French riot cops) were pelted with missiles. Later that night, rioting erupted in the Latin Quarter, injuring 58 cops. Burning cars, barricades, and looting served to demonstrate the extent to which the initial premises of the movement had been left behind, despite the opposition of many students to such a process of generalization. The repeal of the Devaquet Bill was announced on December 8th, followed almost immediately by repeal of the new nationality law.

Two things need to be noted. First, that the reluctance of many students to embrace the struggle of the marginalized and their wrecking and looting would be overcome when they mobilized again in 1994. Second, as in '68, and as would happen again in '95, the initial impetus created by a 'student movement' was followed by a 'workers' movement'. Although plans for a rail strike were already well under way, the government's climb down boosted the railway workers as they prepared for what would be an historic battle.

## (ii) The '86-87 Rail Strike

Through its exemplary quality the movement has created an incomparable precedent ('Emergency stop', in *France goes off the Rails*, BM Blob & BM Combustion).

It was the first time in France that such a large movement broke out completely autonomously while simultaneously setting up organizations of direct democracy to ensure the strike's continuation. (Henri Simon, 'France Winter 86-87, The railways strike, An attempt at autonomous organisation', *Echanges et Mouvement*).

During 1986 there had been fourteen one-day strikes organized by the unions in response to rank and file pressure. Although strike committees began to emerge during these strikes, the symbolic nature of the strikes rendered them ineffectual.<sup>23</sup> Then, in November, a non-union train driver from Paris Nord circulated a petition demanding better conditions and the scrapping of a project for salaries based on promotion by merit (read 'subservience'), proposing to '*have it out once and for all*' if the demands weren't met. Other drivers brought out a leaflet reiterating the demands and calling for an unlimited strike from December 18th. From midnight the strike spread like wildfire, without a single call from the unions, engulfing virtually the entire SNCF (state railway) network by the end of the second day. On December 20th non-drivers joined in as well.



The CGT, with a strong base in the railways, initially opposed the strike openly, tearing down strike posters and in some depots organizing 'work pickets' to encourage drivers not to strike. Finding their position untenable, they made a swift U-turn. But the strike was characterized right from the start by its autonomous organization. Mass assemblies of strikers made all the decisions concerning the running of the dispute and elected strike committees subject to recall (except in the Paris Nord depot where the assembly refused to delegate to a committee at all, seeing it as being a form of separate power potentially above that of the assembly itself, and contravene in Caen and Gare de Lyons where control lay in the hands of the CGT). Co-ordinations between the different committees were established, beginning with local and regional liaison committees, and then national liaisons, to ensure the circulation of information and maximize the impact of the strike.

At the same time, there were strikes by seamen, dockers and metro workers, as well as patchy strikes by postal and munitions workers. And trouble was brewing amongst gas and electricity workers, and miners in Northern France. Although all of these strikes were initiated and controlled by the CGT the *potential* was there for a generalization of the struggle on the basis of the methods of the railway workers. But the government was determined to crush this experiment in autonomy before it got out of hand. The CRS were sent in to violently evict the strikers from the railway stations and signal boxes they had been occupying. The government refused to negotiate with the co-ordinations. Then on December 31st it conceded on the demand of the 'merit wages' and announced negotiations with the unions over working conditions - the central concern of the strikers.

Following the evictions there was widespread sabotage of tracks and rolling stock, even extending to the ambushing of trains in the countryside in order to fuck up the brakes. But faced with the government-management-CGT negotiations axis on the one hand and the full force of the state's violence on the other, together with the collapse of the strikes on the metro and in the electricity industry, the strikers felt unable to continue. Although the strike became increasingly violent and bitter, the sense of isolation contributed to a growing recognition of defeat and there was a full return to work by January 14th.

In one sense the railway workers were defeated; they had been hattered by the cops and they had been forced back to work without having had all of their demands met. But in having taken control over their struggle, the railway workers had made a huge advance. In '68 the workplace assemblies had been mere audiences for the unions to tell the workers what was happening. In '86 the assemblies themselves were sovereign, accepting no power outside of themselves. They were not without important limitations however. Ultimately it was these limits that allowed the unions to represent the strike.

The co-ordinations were never sufficiently well organized to truly represent the movement as a whole, whereas the unions were able to claim that they represented it because they existed *everywhere*. And despite outright hostility to the unions at a local level in some places - forcing union members to remove their badges in some assemblies, expelling the CGT in others, and in most insisting that the day to day running of the strike was their responsibility alone - many workers believed that they needed the unions to negotiate with the government. But perhaps the most important weakness of this movement was the extent to which divisions imposed by the SNCF were reproduced in the autonomous movement. There were joint pickets involving all the different categories of railway worker at Montparnasse, Gare de Lyons and St. Lazare, but sectional differences remained an abiding problem. Separate mass meetings were held by train drivers who insisted on differentiating themselves from the rest of the workforce. Naturally enough this division on the ground reproduced itself at the level of the co-ordinations. Nevertheless, regardless of however else it fell short of it, the development of co-ordinated organizational autonomy

in this movement represented a significant advance upon the delegation to the CGT during the general strike of '68.

### (iii) Further Co-ordinations/Recuperations

Other struggles of the proletariat over the next couple of years demonstrated that the conditions which had given rise to co-ordinating committees in the railway workers strike also existed elsewhere. Workers in the private sector remained in a situation of precariousness, subjected to team-work and increasingly employed on temporary contracts. Between '87 and '90 the average length of the working week increased by 30 minutes whilst wages fell in real terms. But in the public sector the response to the increasing subjection of 'public services' to capitalist imperatives and attempts to restructure the workforce along similar lines was leading to a number of strikes. Whilst lacking the impact of the railway workers' strike, many of those which occurred in 1988-89 led to the re-emergence of assemblies and co-ordinating committees, and in some cases open antagonism with the unions.<sup>21</sup> Particularly important was the nurses' strike between March 1988 and January '89; this occurred in practically non-unionized sector, tempting the government to deal with the co-ordination and thereby posing a threat to the mediating role of the unions. Also, workers at *Banque Nationale de Paris* (a state-owned bank) held assemblies, formed strike committees and established co-ordinating committees during a two month strike in 1989, attacking and ransacking the local offices of the unions who negotiated a return to work behind their backs.<sup>22</sup>

The *lycée* (secondary schools) movement of autumn 1990 however demonstrated that the *form* of the co-ordinating committee is no more a guarantee of autonomous *content* than workers' councils. In that movement (for more money, better buildings and more teaching staff) two co-ordinating committees were established - one close to the JCL (PCF youth federation), the other close to SOS-Racisme - which aptly illustrated that the open and democratic nature of the co-ordinations was no assurance against their political recuperation. The TV seized upon media-friendly 'leaders', but the *lycée* students tended to reject them and their co-ordinating committees, preferring spontaneous violence to dialogue with leftist recuperators.<sup>26</sup>

The demonstrations were characterized by clashes with the police, in which kids from the *banlieue* were particularly involved, and the emergence of looting as an aspect of mass demonstrations. The media tried to split the movement by criminalizing the 'casseurs' (hooligans, wreckers) in the hope that, as they had in '86, students would disown them. But this was a movement of high school students rather than university students and thus closer to the harsh realities facing lower order labour-power. Many *casseurs* were ex-students, but more significantly many students recognized that they too might be in the same situation as the *casseurs*. This awareness enabled the movement to embrace the involvement of 'outsiders' and take up the themes of the revolt in the *banlieue*.

On the terrain of the *banlieue* themselves there was to be a heat wave the following spring. In Vaulx-en-Velin (a suburb of Lyons), cop cars were being smashed up regularly from February onwards to avenge the killing of Thomas Claudio, and more than 600 cops had to be mobilized following the ram-raiding of a cop shop with a BMW. In Sartrouville (suburb to the North West of central Paris), on the 26th, 27th and 28th of March, three days of rioting followed another death, with further incidents on April 10th. Cops were attacked with stones and *pestonque* balls, plainclothes cops beaten up, cars burned and a furniture shop set on fire. TV journalists were systematically attacked and a TFI camera stolen.

But if the left had proved incapable of recuperating those who knew French society had rejected them, an alternative was offering itself in the aftermath of the Sartrouville riots. Whilst cops guarded the supermarkets, the streets were being watched by 30-40 year-old North Africans wearing the green armbands of Islam. A spate of murders to which the rest of French society seemed indifferent, the rise of Le Pen, institutionalized racism, and the rage against anti-

Arab media manipulation during the Gulf War - all of these factors combined to produce a climate favourable to the development of Islamic rackets; and following the riots Islamists attempted to reinforce the ghettoization of the *beurs*. The anti-Semitic forgery, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', was circulated; and, journalists, shopkeepers and the Mayor of Sartrouville were criticized as *Jews* in meetings held to discuss what to do next.

The left wants the *beurs* to identify themselves with the *nation* whose subject they are. The Mullahs encourage the *beurs* to identify themselves *ethnically*. Neither want them to identify themselves in terms of what they *do*. But other ideologies compete for their minds. Excluded from work, they are nevertheless seduced by the images of consumption and the *French* way of life they depict. Whilst the Mullahs are content with the Koran, the *beurs* want these things, and want them immediately. And they *can* gain access to the commodities of French society by involvement in the black economy or through joy-riding, ram-raiding and looting. Through these collective criminal activities, the *beurs* share not only the wealth of modern society but also in the construction of an identity. This identity is neither 'ethnic' nor 'French' but subverts both categories. It is constructed socially, as they are, but through opposition rather than acceptance. It is antagonistic to both backward and modernist variations of hierarchical society. Moreover, it is one which is constructed alongside the marginalized 'French' kids and 'Jewish' kids of the *banlieue*, through the formation of 'multi-ethnic' territorially delineated gangs. The *beurs* have more in common with these other excluded subjects than they do with the Mullahs. Furthermore, women in particular will not want to renounce the freedoms of bourgeois society for the subjugations of a theocratic one.<sup>27</sup>

The experience of blacks in the US has demonstrated, however, that this separatist ideology can be extremely influential amongst the most marginalized. As in the US, the youth of the French ghettos waste much of their anger on gang fights and the like. We should resist the fetishization of violence that forgets to question the ends to which it is used. But, in LA in '92, gang rivalries and separatist ideologies were superseded practically through ferocious anti-hierarchical violence. As we shall soon see, such a supersession also occurred in France in March '94.

#### (iv) Truck Drivers '92

The relative failure of the first co-ordinations and their subsequent political recuperation, compounded by fragmentation and restructuring in the public sector, led to a gradual decline in the tendency in working disputes towards forming co-ordinating committees. The result has been a tendency towards localization - fragmented struggles concentrating on localized autonomy of action.<sup>28</sup>

The truck drivers' strike in the summer of '92 was characterized by a refusal of mediation through virtual non-organization and an emphasis on spontaneous activity. Public sector strikes in the spring of that year had seen off Edith Cresson, who had prioritized the fight against inflation on replacing Rocard as Prime Minister. But, despite the problems they posed for the project of restructuring the public sector, these public sector strikes remained the usual uninteresting affairs. The truck drivers' actions on the other hand captured the imagination on a wide enough scale for the Carling Black Label ad men to base a TV commercial on them.

In response to the announcement of a new points system for driving licences which they saw as a potential threat to their jobs, the truck drivers blockaded the motorways. Riot police and soldiers used tanks to break up some blockades but new ones sprang up in their place. Refusing mediation, communicating locally by CB radio rather than establishing committees, they just waited for the government to accede to their demands - which they did when major industries began to complain about the damaging effects of the strike. By paralysing the arteries of commerce, the truck drivers caused one billion francs of damage to the tourist industry and cost

Spanish fruit firms 150 million francs. More significantly, the strike revealed the vulnerability of the 'just-in-time' factory regimes which had built on the neo-fordist experiments of the '70s.<sup>29</sup> Renault and Peugeot had to close car assembly plants due to shortages of parts whilst the production of Michelin tyres was disrupted.

Whilst the truck drivers' victory was important, it did not serve to bury the culture of defeat and subjection amongst workers which had been produced during the long period of PS rule. But such a transformation occurred the following year when the honeymoon plans of the new conservative government were rudely interrupted by trouble on the runways.

#### (v) Air France '93

The PS lost out in the National Assembly elections in March '93, although Mitterand remained President. A significant minority of the electorate (33 per cent voted for the RPR and UDF, sufficient to give them 80 per cent of the seats in the new parliament) was unhappy with the sacrifices which had *supposedly* made the French economy one of the strongest in the industrialized world.<sup>30</sup> Notably, unemployment had risen from 1.7 million when Mitterand took power to 2.9 million, no longer only affecting blacks and Arabs but making the rest of the population feel insecure and concerned about its social costs. Not the least of which was the continued destruction in the suburbs - particularly worrying for the petit-bourgeoisie who voted for the right.

In 1991 France had signed the Maastricht Treaty and joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), committing the French government, of whatever shade, to pursuing the 'Franc Fort' policy of tailing the relatively strong Deutschmark. This circumscribed the government's ability to deal with the onset of recession in late 1992 through monetary policies (interest rates etc.), leaving only budgetary (tax and spending) and structural policies - exactly the kind of 'head on' measures liable to provoke a working class response.

The incoming government under Edouard Balladur faced a dramatically deteriorating economic and financial situation.<sup>31</sup> A sharp downturn in the economy at the end of 1992 had led to both an unexpected shortfall in tax revenues and an increase in social spending as unemployment rose. As a result, the government's budget deficit, which only six months before had been comfortably within the Maastricht convergence limits, was now projected to double to 5.8 per cent of GDP and was threatening to spin out of control. In response to this financial and economic situation, Balladur's government announced a package of tough economic measures. The package comprised making workers in the public sector work for 40 instead of 37.5 years to qualify for a pension, freezing public sector wages, and increasing hospital charges. Shopkeepers and other petit-bourgeois elements on the other hand were rewarded with grants and other forms of assistance. They were further appeased by the race card the government had used to steal votes from the National Front. Nationality laws and immigration procedures were to be tightened up once more.

The proposals met with only muted opposition from the PS and PCF. The CGT, alone amongst the unions, held a day of protest, but this was a damp squib of an affair. Although the size of the government's majority in relation to its proportion of the votes had produced an air of unreality and a gulf between government and electorate, this lack of opposition to a pretty drastic assault on living standards did not bode well for the prospects for class struggle against the overhaul of the state. Which is why, when frustrations did surface, the struggles were so significant.

The government embarked on a series of privatizations: June '93 *Crédit Local de France*, October '93 *Banque Nationale de Paris*, November '93 Rhone-Poulenc, January '94 Elf Aquitaine, May '94 *Union des Assurances de Paris*, November '94 Renault, etc... Shares in nearly all of these privatized companies have fallen since they were floated and, now that they are no longer shielded from the blackmail of competition by state protection, squeezing more

surplus-value from their workers in order to arrest their decline is the logical response. And the threat of privatization, along with European directives demanding liberalization, has loomed large over industries that remain part of the state sector. The fear of being fragmented from the state sector and subjected to the discipline of the market has played on the mind of workers in the post office, telecom, EDF-GDF (*Electricity de France and Gaz de France*), RATP (the Paris public transport authority), SNCF and Air France ever since.

The privatization programme was however only one aspect of the government's plans to drastically accelerate the process of industrial reorganization and the restructuring of the wage relation. Fundamental to these plans were legislative changes to reflect in labour laws the *de facto* situation in the 'post-fordist' social factory. The Five Year Employment Law, supposedly aimed at reducing unemployment, comprised removing job protections guaranteed by the Popular Front and Liberation governments. But first the government tried to push through a programme of rationalization in one of those industries still directly under state control - Air France. Four thousand workers were to be sacked, with reduced wages, increased productivity and new functional hierarchies for the remainder.

The response by Air France employees was both massive and determined.<sup>82</sup> A national one-day strike called by the unions for October 12th was rapidly spread and extended to all sectors, bringing together all categories of ground staff for the first time since '68. Almost immediately, strikers began to take action to increase the effectiveness of the strike by occupying runways to prevent planes from taking off. The government stated that the plan was 'irrevocable' and sent in the CRS. On October 20th at Roissy, strikers blocking the runways responded to police intervention by launching a vehicle at their lines (missing them and hitting a plane). On October 21st at Orly there were violent confrontations on the runways between the CRS and strikers, masked and toiled-up in anticipation, using vehicles against the cops' water cannons, and further confrontations the next day with strikers smashing windows in the terminal. On the same day in Toulouse strikers blockaded the runways and the central railway station. Unable to break the strike by force, unable to get the strikers to accept a compromise, and unable to withstand the huge losses the strike was causing, the government withdrew its plan on October 24th and the manager of Air France resigned.

The strike was characterized not only by its violence, but also by its organization and its openness. A significant minority of strikers were consciously hostile to the unions, but the unions were generally given reign to control the formal organization of the movement - organizing the general assemblies, co-ordinating the different sites within and between airports, and handling negotiations with the government. The CGT in particular had learnt the lessons from the '86 rail strike and adapted their approach to the assemblies in order not to provoke the re-emergence of non-union co-ordinations. Nevertheless, when it came to *actions* the unions were practically outflanked. During the 'hot week' at Orly the morning general assemblies called by the unions were quickly terminated by cries of 'to the runways!', where tactical discussions around immediate practical objectives took place outside of union channels. And when the FO (and in some places the CGT) called for a return to work following the government's revocation of the 'irrevocable' plan in order that workplace elections could go ahead, assemblies voted for a continuation of the strike - at Orly 3,000 marched on the police to demand the dropping of charges, and at both Orly and Roissy victory demos were held on the runways on October 26th. Furthermore, despite a degree of corporatist pride and identification with the well-being of the company, not unusual in the state sector, the movement was open. Divisions within Air France (freight vs passenger, white collar vs blue collar etc.) were broken down, and 'outsiders' were welcomed - the strikers received huge popular support.

The most significant aspect of the strike however was the blow it had struck against the bullish new government so early in its term, and the boost it had given to the rest of the working class in the face of the timidity of the unions.<sup>83</sup> Wary of sustaining another defeat, the government turned its attention to an area where it reasoned that the forces of opposition would be weaker - training. Youth unemployment was high, the unemployed relatively disorganized, and the student movement not directly concerned with the issue of wages. The government argued that youth unemployment was a result of high labour costs and attempted to impose a reduction in the youth wage, the CIP (*Contrat d'Insertion Professionnel* or 'beginning work contract'), only for it to explode in its face.



(vi) Youth Revolt March '94

The government's defeat at the hand of the Air France strikers only served to increase the popular perception that the right-wing government lacked legitimacy. There was a pervasive air of alienation from the political sphere, and this extended to the PS and PCF as well. The rejection of the usual channels of discontent was expressed in January '94 when a demonstration in Paris against a law authorizing regional and city authorities to fund private (predominantly Catholic) schools was taken as an opportunity to vote with the feet. Between 600,000 and one million people took to the streets, many of whom had no real concerns about the educational issue but wanted to express their general opposition to the government and frustrations with society in general.<sup>84</sup>

The demonstration was peaceful, which is partly why it has almost been forgotten, overshadowed as it has been by the confrontations which rocked France on either side of it. Incidentally, the law was scrapped as unconstitutional. But the demonstration was significant for establishing a practice of responding to unpopular decrees from above by taking to the streets *en masse*, taking the



opportunity to develop a popular but diverse unity of opposition therein, and using the demonstrations to protest against a general malaise without having to go through bureaucratic channels. This demonstration can be seen as a prelude to those against the Juppé plan when exactly the same phenomenon occurred, but repeatedly, on a wider scale, and connected with a strike wave.

If the peacefulness of this demonstration marked a break with the violent tendencies of the *lycé* movement and Air France strike then such a tendency was to be quickly re-established. In February '94 French fishermen rioted, and, in an attempt to hit the cops with brass flares, burned down the 'Bretton parliament' (a local court building) in Rennes. Although some other elements used the opportunity to have some fun, it remained a strictly sectional affair, defined by opposition to measures affecting the fishing industry. But the following month saw the emergence of a movement which combined the tendency towards violent confrontation with that of using demonstrations to express an opposition held in common by different social groups.

On February 24th the government presented the CIP, allowing employers to take on first time wage-slaves at only 80 per cent of the legal minimum wage, establishing a 'SMIC-jeune' or minimum wage for youth.<sup>37</sup> The response to this 20 per cent wage cut for young proletarians was a month of almost daily marches which increasingly tended to become full blown riots. Prime Minister Balladur became 'haunted by the fear of an explosion of the May 1968 sort' whilst President Mitterand began to talk of the danger of 'imminent social revolt',<sup>38</sup> and on March 30th the government conceded defeat.

The movement was unprecedented. Although in some respects it marked a continuation of tendencies which had been emerging in the 'student' movements of '86 and '90, the Air France strike and the revolts,<sup>39</sup> schools mobilization, it nevertheless had a *unique* character.<sup>40</sup> The CIP created an immediate basis for unity between different types of students, workers, and the unemployed. Each sector was concerned to fight an attack on the terrain, defined *socially*, as that of the wage relation - the fundamental social relation of capitalist society - but on the terrain defined *physically* of the streets.

The movement was diffuse - both spatially and organizationally - and stronger for it. Spatially, it was the first movement which was not dominated by the gravitational pull of Paris;<sup>41</sup> marches happened in Lyons, Nantes, Rennes - literally *everywhere*. Organizationally, the movement was characterized by an almost complete absence of legitimate representation. The movement made use of the traditional structures - the unions, including the student unions UNEF, UNEF-ID and FIDL, and the co-ordinations of technical university institutes - which were used for the initial mobilizations and to develop the movement nationwide. Assemblies were held in university buildings which had been occupied by striking students. But as the interaction of the subjects in the streets developed its own dynamic, formal structures, and the unions in particular, became marginalized. The level of organization characterizing the movement was fluid and unstructured, arising spontaneously out of the marches themselves. This outflanked attempts by the unions to establish march monitors/stewards. Thus the movement developed in a direction that was both haphazard and powerful.<sup>42</sup>

The movement was also heterogeneous. No single social subject asserted hegemony over it. It was not a 'student movement'. When the state came to analyse the composition of the 5,000 or so arrested during the course of the movement, 30 per cent were found to be university and technical students, 30 per cent secondary school students, and 30 per cent unemployed or precarious workers. The gangs from the *banlieue*, including *beurs* who were also angry about the ID checks and nationality laws recently introduced by the government, were incorporated without being neutralized. This heterogeneity gave the movement a truly *proletarian* character, breaking completely, in the direction other movements had only pointed, with the politics of the labour movement.

What characterized the movement more than anything, however, was its systematic and targeted violence. Initially defensive and determined to resist the state's attempts to physically repress the movement, it brought the *intifada* from the peripheries to explode in the centre of the metropolis. The lack of any centralized organizing structure allowed for differences, however. In Nantes, for example, there was night after night of violent clashes with riot cops guarding the prefecture, but in the main shops were spared, some having their windows smashed but not looted. In Lyons on the other hand, not only were there daily clashes with the cops, but over 200 shops were looted. And in both Paris and Lyons cars left along the route of the marches were routinely wrecked or torched. Indeed the police had to ban parking along the proposed routes of demonstrations in Paris and insist that shops within a mile radius put up their shutters.

This endemic violence was extended from the movement's most apparent enemy - the cops - to a more insidious one. Television crews and anyone else with a video camera were confronted, their equipment smashed up, and chased from the demonstrations. These attacks were not just a response to the immediate threat posed by this equipment<sup>43</sup> but was also a response to the media role in the government's attempt to divide the movement.

The government sent the CRS in hard and made thousands of arrests. But, as it had been with the Air France dispute, it was concerned not to get into a continually escalating spiral of confrontations for fear of where it might lead.<sup>44</sup> The state needed to be able to target its violence, and thus needed to get the movement to disown the *casseurs* which it had identified as the most dangerous subjects. In Paris and Lyons efforts were made to intercept the multi-ethnic gangs from the *banlieue* as they arrived at Metro and railway stations linking the centre to the peripheries, and efforts were made, helped by union stewards in some cases, to single them out on demonstrations. But the main tactics were ideological. That old scumbag Pasqua, who had overseen the murderous period of '86 and had come back to preside over the latest bout of state terrorism, defended the right to demonstrate but said he would not permit thousands of hooligans to come in from the *banlieue* and attach themselves to demonstrations in order to engage in street fighting and looting. He then expelled two Algerian kids from Lyons in order to give the impression that the violence was ethnic in origin. After having tried to paint the movement as a whole as nothing more than one of mindless hooliganism, the media quickly picked up on this theme of a division within the movement between the 'respectable students' and the *casseurs*.

But the movement refused to be divided. '*Nous sommes tous des casseurs!*' (we are all wreckers!) was one of the slogans used to counter this propaganda offensive. Another was simply to argue that it was the government and capitalists who were the real wreckers. The movement, except for the union stewards who also wanted to rid the movement of this element, refused to accept that the phenomenon of 'wrecking' was down to a separate contingent who could be disowned. On March 25th in Paris all of the sections of the march demanded the freeing of comrades arrested, '*casseurs*' or not, during the confrontations. The movement as a whole had come to accept the legitimacy of the methods which the youth from the *banlieue* had brought to the movement. Hence when the government tried to split the movement by conceding to university students, restoring the legal minimum wage for those with a two-year university diploma or its equivalent, those students insisted on remaining with the movement as a whole until the government backed down completely. University students had recognized that, rather than being the bosses of the future, most of them looked forward to a future in which they would remain (skilled) proletarians, possibly even unemployed ones at that.

#### (vii) The stage is set

We arrive almost on the eve of battle and it is time to assess the troops. This short survey of class struggle in France since the Second World War has revealed something quite important. The working

class has for sure been on the defensive since the heady days of '68. Inevitably such a rearguard campaign has meant that there have been many defeats. But there has been no defeat on the scale of the miners' strike in the UK. There has been nothing to send a signal throughout society as a whole that the boot is firmly on the other foot. In the UK it has been a pretty sure bet that kicking up a fuss will lead to defeat. But quite the opposite is true in France. What lessons would the working class of France have drawn from the major battles with the state of the '90s? Surely the main one would be that taking to the streets can defeat the government - that active opposition bears fruit.

This is not to say that capital has not succeeded at all in restructuring the factory. As we have seen, workers in the private sector feel less inclined to take strike action. Nevertheless private enterprises are far from having eliminated strikes altogether. For instance, in March '95 a spontaneous strike wave paralysed Renault plants throughout France by blockading or occupying the plants.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it to say that no progress has been made in rationalizing the 'welfare burden'. But, as we have seen, attempts by the state to

restructure the reproduction of labour-power (Devaquet Bill or CIP for instance) have been repulsed.

What of the union question? Following the initial experiments with the co-ordinating committees, we have seen a tendency towards seizing control over the actual *daily activity* of struggles but, rather than making a direct organizational challenge to the mediation of the unions, allowing the unions to play the role of *representing* the movement and *negotiating* for it. And why not? Alternatives to unions tend to become alternative unions as a result of having to perform the negotiating role. In these recent struggles in France the negotiating position has been made clear to the unions at the grassroots level - repeal of the law, or the bill, or the plan. It has been absolute. A single measure on the one hand and outright opposition to it on the other. What room does that leave for a 'sell out'? But what happens is the opposition when that single measure becomes split up into a number of measures and the unions have been left to resolve the situation - does the opposition fragment as well?



## (C) The Social Movement of November - December 1995

## (i) Paris in Spring

If the French state's economic strategy had been in any way blunted by a right-wing government having to compromise with a socialist President then that problem would be resolved in May '95 with the election of Jacques Chirac, bringing to an end fourteen years of Mitterrand's rule. In March '95, France had been brought to a virtual standstill by simultaneous air, rail and urban transport strikes, to which the Presidential candidates had responded by exuding sympathy. This understanding approach was used in Chirac's successful electoral platform, which promised to put employment first (unemployment had now reached 3.3 million), increase wages, cut taxes, heal the country's 'social fracture' and protect social welfare benefits.

Alain Juppé was installed as Chirac's new Prime Minister. The rent-fixing scandal, involving his acquisition, when Mayor of Paris, of city-owned luxury flats at bargain rents for his friends and family, coming hot on the heels of other corruption scandals and exacerbated by the resumption of nuclear testing in the Pacific, sent the government into an unprecedented slump in the opinion polls. But priorities lay elsewhere. U-turns and broken promises on economic priorities had led to speculation that the government would fail to cut the public sector deficit enough to keep to the timetable for EMU, and consequently there was a run on the franc. On October 6th Chirac was overheard muttering 'The priority is to avoid a monetary disaster. The government has not convinced the financial markets. We must send signals.'<sup>43</sup>

## (ii) Autumn Rumbles

The statement above reflected the situation which existed *after* the September budget for 1996 which included a freeze on public sector wages, a measure over which Juppé publicly refused to negotiate with the unions. The job security, retirement rights and conditions of workers in state owned companies like France Telecom and the SNCF were also effectively denounced as special privileges. Trouble had already been brewing in the public sector, with a series of local strikes and occupations in the post office against the piecemeal introduction of a restructuring plan, and over 700 strike notices issued in the SNCF on top of regular wildcat strikes. The response from the public sector unions to the pay freeze was to organize a day of united public sector strikes and demonstrations for October 10th.<sup>44</sup> Over three million went on strike for the day, the biggest such stoppage for over a decade, with the demonstrations mobilizing 382,000 (according to police figures). The scale of this protest gave a clear signal to the unions that further calls would be heeded.

Meanwhile science and technology students returning to studies in Rouen from their summer holidays had started an indefinite strike against a spending cut resulting from the Bayrou plan which was endangering their adequate reproduction as technical labour-power, demanding twelve million francs for more teachers and equipment, and demonstrating the extent to which the grim realities of survival had come to replace the hope for real life as the central concern of students over the years since '68. A strike committee was formed and the strike quickly became an active one, seeing 1,000 students blockade Rouen's rail traffic on October 16th, followed by motorway blockades and toll-booth occupations. On October the 25th the university administration offices were occupied and barricaded, whilst the police were kept busy by a student demonstration elsewhere, only to be violently evicted by the cops that night. This only resulted in an escalation of the strike, however. Over a thousand students demonstrated in protest at the eviction and humanities students joined the strike.

By the first week of November, having had an offer of six million francs rejected by the Rouen students assembly, and remembering '86 and '94, the government was sufficiently

concerned about the possibility of the movement's extension to concede nine million francs to end the strike. But far from containing the movement within this one university, this concession encouraged it to spread throughout the provinces. Within the next fortnight, students in Metz, Toulouse, Tours, Orleans, Caen, Nice, Montpellier, Perpignan and elsewhere staged strikes and demonstrations, each raising demands for greater funding, and on November 16th students in Paris finally joined in the movement.<sup>45</sup> More than 100,000 students demonstrated across the country on November 21st, three days before the first big demonstrations against the 'Juppé Plan', and on the November 30th student demonstration the numbers swelled to 160,000 as railway and other workers joined in with their banners as students had the demonstrations against the 'Juppé Plan' on November 24th.

This mobilization gave an added impetus to the spreading of the public sector strike following the November 24th day of action. The fact that it was about money, plus the fact that many students defined it as 'a social movement rather than a student movement', made it easy for the two movements to grasp their connection. But the student movement *as such* began to subside just as the struggle elsewhere was picking up, with those students who wished to participate dissolving themselves into it as individuals - proletarians - rather than constituting themselves as a separate body within a coalition of specific groups. Part of the reason for this was the disastrous outcome of the student co-ordinations meeting in Paris. Delegates from the provinces, where the movement was strongest, tended to be representative of assemblies whilst those from Paris, where the movement was relatively weaker, tended to be hacks from the student unions or leftist groupings. Centring the co-ordinations in Paris therefore resulted in a high degree of politicking and ideologically-motivated sectarian rivalry which alienated those who wanted to take the movement forward. At the University of Jussieu on November 23rd, the nationally co-ordinating body unsuccessfully tried to exclude students who, having two days earlier looted the university book shop, had just overturned a number of cars, thrown molotovs at the cops and raided the canteen. The result of separating the political representation from the social movement ended in chaos when the excluded finally gained admittance. The student co-ordination appears to have disintegrated soon thereafter, unable to contribute anything useful to the unfolding of events apart from a lot of hot air.

However, the main reason for the subsidence of the student movement was the government's policy of selective appeasement. On December 2nd the government opened negotiations with student representatives and conceded to their demands in order to split them off from the rest of the movement, a tactic which would be repeated with great success with the railway workers a week or so later.

## (iii) The 'Juppé Plan'

On November 15th Alain Juppé revealed his package of measures to cut the deficit of a welfare budget argued to be heading towards bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup> This set of measures was seen as crucial for reassuring the foreign exchange markets that France would be able to stick to the Maastricht timetable.

The austerity package was such that many of the measures only had a direct impact on workers in the state sector. Above all, workers in the SNCF and RATP were to be subjected to specific measures on top of those aimed at the rest of the public sector, and at the working class in general.



## The 'Juppé Plan'

- A new tax (the RDS, *Réimbursement of the Dette Sociale*) of 0.5 per cent on all wages, breaking with the practice of exempting the low paid from direct taxes, to be introduced to clear an accumulated welfare deficit of 250 billion francs over the next thirteen years. The current welfare deficit was to be reduced from 64 billion francs in 1995 to seventeen billion francs in 1996 through a series of increased contributions and reduced benefits.
- Reduced spending on health, estimated to account for up to half of welfare 'losses', and increased charges on patients for public hospitals. Introduction of 'log book' medical records to restrict prescriptions and prevent patients from consulting specialists without the approval of a GP.
- Family benefit (paid to low income families with children) to be frozen in '96 and taxed from '97. Suspension of plan to introduce a home-care allowance for the elderly.
- Pension system for public sector workers to be brought into line with that of private sector workers, extending from 37.5 years to 40 years the length of service required for a full pension. Also abolition of the '*régimes particuliers*' for those in the public sector with 'difficult working conditions', under which SNCF or RATP train drivers can retire at 50 or other RATP, EDF-GDF, post office and coal workers at 55.
- Radical restructuring of social security administration, transferring health, pension and family allowance financing from joint control by the unions and employers into a form involving an enlarged role for the state, along with a planned constitutional amendment to allow the government to set a ceiling on welfare spending.
- At around the same time, the details of the '*contrat de plan*', a restructuring package for the SNCF, were revealed to include the regionalization of management, closure of 6,000 km of track and the sacking of 30,000-50,000 workers. Considered by many to be a prelude to privatization, a threat also hanging over the heads of workers in telecom, EDF-GDF etc.
- Also at the same time, the Treasury mooted the removal of a 20 per cent tax allowance given to all employees.

The nature of the Juppé package may explain why, as we shall see, the strike started in the SNCF and spread to the RATP first; above all, it explains why the movement was concentrated in the public sector. It also gives us some clues, but not the whole reason, as to why the unions adopted such a degree of militancy in opposition to the plan.

The package was presented to the National Assembly without any official consultation with the unions. In the eyes of the unions, this threatened to undermine the acceptance by the French bourgeoisie, one that had endured since 1936, of the role of the unions as *social partners*. Indeed the main employers' federation, the CNPF (*Conseil National du Patronat Français*), also resented the government's unilateral declaration of the 'Juppé plan' and the way it interfered with its partnership with the unions. Bipartite negotiations over major social issues such as unemployment had been established between the union confederations and the CNPF, which had been particularly concerned over recent years 'to maintain institutional channels for the expression and mobilisation of discontent...'

On top of this the social security reforms explicitly sought to limit the power of the trade unions to manage the welfare system. The trade unions derived a great deal of benefit, in terms of entrenchment, perks and cushy jobs for functionaries, from this administrative function. In particular the usually moderate FO particularly resented measures which would have meant removing its nose from the trough of health insurance administration. Indeed, whilst the leader of the CFDT, Nicole Notat, greeted the proposals

with the statement 'the reforms proceed in a sensible manner', the leader of the FO, Marc Blondel called them 'a declaration of war to the FO' and called for a day of action on November 28th.

The unions needed to flex their muscles in order to demonstrate to the government that they could not be either disregarded or ousted from their spheres of influence. At this point it is worth remembering that for all the French bourgeoisie's attempts to impose austerity upon the working class there had never been a challenge to the unions' position as social partners. The Popular Front and Liberation governments had promoted the unions to a central position in the social organization of French capitalism, and such a position had remained unchallenged. Whilst such a relationship was being terminated in the UK by the new broom of Thatcher and in the US by Reagan, Mitterrand was coming to power in France determined to work with the unions. His fourteen year rule had ensured that the relationship had been maintained despite the eventual rightwards shift in policy. It was only now, following the election of Chirac, that the partnership role of the unions was being explicitly questioned for the first time.

However, if the unions' position was being threatened by new developments in the French state, they also had to beware that their mediating role was not to be endangered by the rising discontent which had sometimes sought to bypass them in the past. Whilst not wanting to precipitate a general strike, the CGT and the FO certainly wanted to unleash a strong public sector strike. But in order to make clear the basis of their status in the social partnership, the unions had to ensure that they did not do anything to provoke or encourage the development of autonomous organizations which would have threatened their role as sole legitimate representatives of the workers in negotiations with the state. Thus they were not in the least antithetical to the development of *localized* autonomy in the form of strike assemblies. Indeed the contradictory experiences of the '86 rail strike and the '93 Air France strike had shown them how to maximize their influence with the state by minimizing interference at the grass roots level. However, the tendency to portray the struggle as one in which the unions simply ran fast to stay abreast of autonomy in order to get in a saving tackle on the strikers says more about the limits of an analysis which sees unions only as 'firemen for the bourgeoisie' than it does about a contradictory movement, like the one we are dealing with here, in which the union structures themselves as well as the workers were under threat.

## (iv) The Response

## (a) The strike

The CGT called for a 'day of action' in support of civil servants for Friday November 24th. Perhaps sensing a determined groundswell of discontent, the unions one by one issued strike notices to coincide with the demonstration - the CGT for 8pm on the 23rd until 8am on the 25th, the FO for a five-day strike to connect to their day of action the following week, and the CFDT, demagogically, for an indefinite strike. Whatever, it was to be another three and a half weeks before most of the workers who struck that day returned to work.

Throughout the whole of France, half a million took part in huge demonstrations which were relatively larger in the provinces than in Paris, with tens of thousands marching in cities as far apart as Marseilles, Lyons and Toulouse in the South to Lille in the North. In Paris, workers from throughout the public sector, from train drivers to teachers, were joined by workers from a wide variety of private sector companies. Nicole Notat, leader of the CFDT, was subjected to violent abuse by workers belonging to her union, forcing her to leave the demonstration. And it was clear that this was not a tokenistic affair like the usual one-day strikes. The public transport system in the Paris region, including the railway network, was completely paralysed.

Railway workers held general assemblies in the big rail depots, deciding to continue the strike and to hold further assemblies on a daily basis. Delegations of strikers, including union activists acting with the approval of their leaders, then played a crucial role in the

extension of the strike, first to the RATP, and then to the major postal sorting offices (usually located near rail depots) and other urban public transport systems. Some of the most active minorities engaged, without the democratic blessing of the assemblies, in exemplary acts of sabotage. Whereas in the 1986 strike movement the sabotage was more of the traditional variety (train couplings etc. with a hammer and spanner), that which occurred last December comprised hi-tech sabotage of the control boxes on the railway and of other computer systems and communication equipment including the bringing to a standstill of nuclear power stations (without danger of release of radioactive substances)<sup>48</sup>. This level of rank-and-file activity was in marked contrast to the passive nature of much of the '68 general strike. The way the assemblies operated also marked an advance on those which the rail strike of '86 had produced. Not only were the divisions between different categories of railway - worker transcended - drivers, ticket collectors and all the other grades discussing how to proceed together - but complete outsiders - other workers, the unemployed etc. - were also welcomed, transcending the divisions which cripple the class. However, we must not overstate the self-activity of the assemblies. In the first place, the assemblies varied in openness across different workplaces; and, second, the assemblies were ultimately unable to escape the control of the unions.

By the end of November, substantial numbers of electricity and gas workers, kindergarten and primary school teachers, and some secondary and tertiary lecturers had joined the strike. In those sectors where only a minority were on strike (post, telecom, electricity and gas), occupations of premises were used to increase the impact. In exemplary fashion electricity workers occupying distribution centres switched domestic consumers onto the cheaper night tariff during the day.

Despite some autonomous efforts to encourage the spread of the strike to the private sector, as a rule such an extension did not occur. There were exceptions though. In some parts of France, lorry drivers blocked roads in support of their unions' demand for retirement at the age of 55. At Caen, Renault workers from Blainville along with workers from Moulinex-Citroen, Credit Lyonnais, Credit Agricole and Kodak struck in order to join the regular demonstrations. In Clermont-Ferrand thousands of Michelin workers did the same, and in Lorraine miners went on strike for higher wages and fought running battles with the police. But the only place where substantial numbers of private sector workers broke down the political barrier separating the two sectors was in Rouen where a delegation of 800 strikers went to the Renault Cleon plant to encourage them to strike and join them in blocking roads and the like.

#### (b) The demonstrations

Whilst there was no general strike, the winter crisis amounted to more than simply a public sector strike. Local government buildings were occupied, the channel tunnel was blocked, runways were invaded, and motorway toll booths were requisitioned to raise strike funds. But perhaps the most notable feature of the movement was the series of demonstrations which brought hundreds of thousands of

people out onto the streets: the 'Juppéthons' of November 24th and 28th, December 5th and 7th, culminating in the huge rallies on the 12th and 16th of December. Juppé had promised to resign if two million people took to the streets, thereby setting a target for the movement. Other public sector workers including civil servants, dockers, airport workers and hospital workers, as well as delegations from the private sector, struck on the days of the demonstrations, and they continued to grow in size. By the first week of December, more than a million were taking part in the demonstrations. And by the second week the magic number of two million had been reached.

The demonstrations were both massive and carnivalesque. Proletarians mixed and had fun regardless of professional or sectional differences, unlike on the funeral marches so typical of normal political demonstrations, producing a tangible feeling that social relations were being transformed through transforming the psychogeography of the street. But although there were clashes with the cops after demonstrations in Paris, Montpellier and Nantes on December 5th, the marches themselves did not erupt into the kind of confrontations which occurred regularly in the movement of the

previous year. In large part this may have been due to the fact that the demonstrations were too big for the cops to attack so the CRS had to be kept on a tight leash.<sup>49</sup> Rather than risk raising the stakes it was left up to union stewards (including 'revolutionary' ones from the CNT) to keep the peace. Moreover, without an initial spark provided by friction with the cops, the step to riot and direct appropriation is, psychologically, a huge one for most people.

It has to be recognized, however, that the movement did not attract the *casseurs* who might have transcended the limited dialogue of the workers' movement in favour of the universal language (spoken by worker and non-worker alike the world over) of the proletarian riot. The demonstrations remained peaceful, within certain boundaries and limited in impact. Only in Montpellier and Nantes, the cities where the clashes occurred, did the kids from the *banlieue* join in with the social upheaval. In the main, the *banlieue* remained quiet.

Some 6,800 acts of urban violence had occurred in 1995 according to the French intelligence services, causing the junior minister for urban affairs to denounce what he called an *intifada à la Française*.<sup>50</sup> Riots had occurred throughout the year in the suburbs of Paris and elsewhere. But it seems as if the gangs were not attracted to the movement. Perhaps it was because they were not being directly attacked as they had been in '94. Or perhaps because from their perspective, that of the marginalized, the government's labelling of the main protagonists as 'privileged' rang true. Or could it be that the attraction towards a separatist ideology had increased? In May *beurs* and Jewish kids in a Parisian suburb had fought the cops together after the latter had issued racist statements attacking both groups. But since then there had been a wave of terrorist bombings related to the civil war in Algeria and 'Islamic fundamentalism' had become a national obsession, labelling anyone without a white face as a potential terrorist suspect. The French



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media had celebrated the public execution on September 29th of 'terrorist suspect' Khaled Kelkal, an unemployed 24 year-old of Algerian origin from Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburb of Lyons. TV pictures showed a cop kicking the corpse, and reactions to the footage revealed deep divisions. Whilst many felt relief that an enemy within had been eliminated, Vaulx-en-Velin exploded at yet another state atrocity.

#### (v) Prospect of European Escalation

The movement in France was also beginning to hear echoes of itself beyond its national boundaries. Solidarity rallies were held in Rome and Athens. In Berlin on December 14th a demonstration in solidarity with 'foreigners' inside Germany turned into a demonstration of solidarity with the struggle of those in France. But the most significant developments occurred in Belgium where, after a month long strike by Alcatel employees against redundancies, and following a demonstration of students and teachers in Liege which ended in a violent confrontation with the cops, a demonstration was called by the unions for December 13th. Sixty thousand or so marched in Brussels against spending cuts. The railway workers of the SNCB, who had been on strike for three days, along with Sabena employees, whose strike had disrupted air traffic, were at the forefront.

Any possibilities of transcending national divisions in a unified struggle against the formation of a 'bankers' Europe' were stillborn, however. Negotiations between the government and the unions in France had begun to seek a settlement. Within two days of the demonstration in Belgium, strike assemblies in France were discussing a faxed circular from the CGT calling for an end to the strike.

#### (vi) The Settlement

Through paralysing circulation, the strike was beginning to have a major impact upon the French economy.<sup>31</sup> Shortages of raw materials began to hit the production of surplus-value whilst a lack of customers in the cities hit at its realization. All in all, the strike was estimated to have cost French capital up to eight billion francs

strike, using De Gaulle's half million strong demonstration in May '68 as its model, ended in farce, mobilizing only a couple of hundred people. And attempts to form 'transport users' committees' barely got off the ground. Clearly the strikers enjoyed overwhelming, if still overwhelmingly passive, support. So threats to call a referendum or general election to resolve the crisis also had to be forgotten quickly.

Unable to face down such a strong and unified movement on December 5th, the government offered to open negotiations with the unions, offering a few paltry concessions with no mention of the planned changes to pensions. This offer in itself was taken by the CFDT as reason enough to call off the strikes, indicating the extent to which the priority of all the unions was to regain their invite to the bargaining table. But the CGT and FO dismissed the offer as a non-response and vowed to continue the strike until the welfare reform plan was withdrawn. However, the opening of negotiations signalled that the movement's unwillingness to challenge the unions' overall control would fatally undermine its ability to achieve its demands. On November 28th, the government had declared that 'the welfare reforms are a single package', and the movement had united around the twin demands of scrapping the package *as a whole* and sacking the man responsible. But in the negotiations the government's strategy became one of selective appeasement in order to split the movement. Concessions had already been made to the student movement in order to split it from the main body of struggle, and the government now proceeded to separate and isolate the different aspects of the package in order to deal with each one separately over a longer period.

On December 10th the climb down was announced. The *contrat de plan* for the SNCF would be put on ice and the proposal to increase the number of years public sector employees would have to work for their pensions dropped. The *régimes particulier* would remain. Promises were made to protect the public services from the deregulation demanded by the EU. Wage negotiations with the miners were to be reopened. Assurances had been given to the FO concerning their position regarding social security reform. A 'social summit' between the government and union leaders was announced for 22nd December.



in lost production. But the government was unable to break the movement by force. Efforts to run a fleet of scab buses for Parisian commuters had to be abandoned due to the paralysis of the traffic system. The RPR's attempt to organize a demonstration against the

The dissatisfaction of the rank-and-file with these concessions was evident when two million demonstrated on December 12th. But the fax from the CGT on December 15th marked the beginning of the end. It was greeted with anger by many strikers including CGT



branch officials who were initially convinced it was a forgery. General assemblies at the Gare du Nord in Paris, the South West Paris rail depot, in Lyons, Rouen and elsewhere initially voted to continue the strike, unhappy that the demands of the movement as a whole had not been met. But no alternative to union control had been established. There was no national co-ordination to organize the continuation of the strike and negotiate a better deal. Anyway, the seeds of division had been sown with the withdrawal of those aspects of the Juppé plan which had particularly riled the most combative sectors in the struggle, those who had been on all-out strike. The assemblies of striking railway workers began to exclude the 'outsiders' who had previously been made welcome. Votes for a return to work were carried. Within three days, and despite the fact that the demonstrations on December 16th were still huge, the rail strike was practically over. The return to work followed, gradually, elsewhere. Bar a few notable exceptions, the movement had ended.<sup>2</sup>

The union leaderships had won major concessions from the government. Railway workers and other workers in the public sector had ensured that the aspects of the package which had made them most angry had been scrapped. But those measures which had fueled the immediate deficit-reduction timetable remained. The RDS, the increase in hospital fees, health spending caps, the freeze on family allowances - all of these measures which would together reduce the social security deficit by 43 billion francs - remained intact. These were the measures which had united the *demonstrators*, measures which affected public and private sector worker alike. But by ending the *strikes* the government had managed to preserve these measures, described by *The Economist* as 'the essentials'.<sup>3</sup>

#### (vii) Reflections

Only idiots complain about sell outs. We can criticize unions and parties, recognize their role of recuperation and mediation, but our criticisms must begin with and develop from within the movement of the working class itself. The question is why the movement was unable to go further. If it could not go all the way, and *had* to settle for crumbs, then could it still not have achieved more? What was missing was some kind of *co-ordinated* autonomous control over the movement. Perhaps if the local examples of autonomy had co-ordinated nationally... But this would have been a big step. The unions were wary of provoking co-ordinations, and thus avoided confronting the strike assemblies, even going so far as to praise their autonomous activities. And those railway workers who wanted to trigger an all-out strike did not see the need for autonomous organization; quite the opposite, they knew that if they tried to revive something like the co-ordinations they risked confrontation with the unions and the end to the spirit of unity that seemed to be of paramount importance in persuading hesitating workmates. Besides which, their strike of '86, for all its advances in self-organization, and perhaps in part because of them, had ended in harsh defeat.

Perhaps this is the wrong way to look at the question. There was no autonomous *organization* because there was no clash between the strikers and the unions to give rise to it until it was too late - the *forms* of autonomy arise out of circumstances which make them necessary. The CGT and the FO roundly condemned the 'Juppé plan' and encouraged an all-out strike in the public sector. The problem then is that the movement was unable to extend itself beyond a public sector strike on the one hand and limited demonstrations on the other. Or to put it another way, the fundamental problem was that the class remained divided between those prepared to throw themselves into the struggle and those who supported it passively.

In strictly *formal* terms the movement was simply a trade union affair. It cannot be denied that the unions remained in charge, permitting and even encouraging a certain level of autonomous activity. But it would be an easy mistake to look at these events from the sort of perspective which looks only for particular organizational

forms, seeing in the unions only monolithic structures of domination. The 'new unionism' which tolerated autonomy should be seen as mediating a real expression of antagonistic subjectivity. Like that of the state, the mediating and recuperating role of the union is made and remade through struggle - crystallizations of previous waves of struggle liquefied by new antagonisms. The movement can be criticized for not developing the requisite organizational forms in order for it to go further. But it is also necessary to identify the more positive aspects of the struggle in the hope that - next time - they may develop the forms adequate for the realization of their full potential. The *Intakes* articles we reproduce in this issue of *Aufheben* draw out some of those aspects.

#### Epilogue: France Risks New Unrest

The most important thing about the movement of November and December 1995 must be how the working class of France follows it up. The only thing that is certain is that it will come under attack again. The pressures which led to the Juppé plan remain. The convergence criteria for Maastricht still need to be met.

In May '96 a special cabinet meeting was held where ministers were ordered to make savings of £7.8 billion over eighteen months. Chirac had demanded 'draconian' cuts, insisting that a change of mentality on public spending had to be made either voluntarily or by force. A government official announced that 'No figure has been fixed yet on eventual savings, but the effort needed to meet targets will mean cuts on a scale never seen before'.<sup>4</sup>

It is because more battles will be fought that it is necessary for the limits of the winter movement to be superseded. There is a need for critique. The articles we reproduce here are attempts at such a critique by people who were participants. Without necessarily agreeing with every point in them we recognize their importance. The movement towards communism depends upon critical reflection and practical supersession. It is to be hoped that the inclusion of these articles may hasten the day in which the struggles of the French working class become as one with our own.

September 1996

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The SWP is the largest far-leftist organization in the UK; the ICC is (probably) the largest left-communist organization in the world (not saying much!). That theoretically the ICC purists uphold 'communist positions' while the SWP opportunistically flits between different 'counter-revolutionary' positions is of course a difference between the organizations. What is interesting with regards the French events is their similarity. The SWP thinks all the movement lacked was the 'right leadership' which was not given by the PCF, the unions or French Trot groups. The ICC on the other hand sees the working class as completely hoodwinked by these 'cunning factions of the bourgeoisie'. But, as Leninists, they both agree that they somehow possess what the working class lacks - the correct leadership or consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> See 'ENLU in the class war' in *Aufheben* 1.

<sup>3</sup> From 'France after the strikes', in *Frontline* (Australian activist newspaper), posted on the internet by Harry Cleaver for *Acción Zapatista de Austin*.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Dr Kohl's prescription for trouble', in *The Guardian*, 1st August 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See 'A New Hot Autumn: The struggle against the Italian government and the official trade unions is the struggle against the Europe of the bosses', *London Notes*, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> One account of the COBAS is Gregor Gall, 'The emergence of a rank and file movement: the *Comitati di Base* in the Italian workers' movement', in *Capital & Class* 55 (spring 1995). A more satisfactory account, but earlier and therefore more about their origin, is David Brown (1988), *The COBAS: Italy, 1968-88: A new rank and file movement* (Exchanges et Mouvement).

<sup>7</sup> In considering the extent to which bourgeois anti-fascism played a central role in shaping post-war France, the period of the Popular Front government should not be forgotten. Many enduring labour protection laws, such as the 40 hour week and significant nationalizations (*Banque de France*, via industries, railways etc.) were enacted in June 1936 in response to a wave of strikes and factory occupations involving two million workers. An account of internationalist

resistance to fascism is contained in the pamphlet 'Internationalists in France during the Second World War' by Pierre Lanmeret.

The reference to a fordist *crisis* requires an explanation because of a later reference to the neo-fordist *labour process* further on in the article. By fordist economy we mean Fordism, a mode of capital accumulation based on the mass production and mass consumption of consumer durables. The establishment of the fordist *labour process* was its necessary prerequisite. As a valorization process extracting relative surplus-value it allowed for rising profits to occur alongside expanded consumption for the working class. By using the assembly line to dictate the pace of work to a workforce, which had already been broken down into deskilled component parts by Taylorism, the fordist labour process was, up to certain limits, able to impose progressive increases in productivity. See previous issues of *Aufheben* in particular 'EMUs In The Class War' in no. 1 but also the review article in no. 2 'Anti-Struggles' in no. 3) for our use of the concept of Fordism and for our criticisms of the regulation school which developed them.

<sup>9</sup> Interrupted only by strike waves in 1953 and 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the events are encouraged to seek out original sources. Fortunately there are a number of decent pamphlets available in English: R. Grégoire & F. Perlmán (1969) *Worker-Student Action Committees: France, May '68* (Detroit: Black & Red); R. Vigné (1968) *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (New York: Autonomedia / London: Rebel Press); and the eye-witness account produced by Solidarity (1968) *Paris: May 1968* (London: Dark Star/Rebel Press).

<sup>11</sup> This analysis obviously owes a debt to that of the Situationist International.  
<sup>12</sup> It would be inaccurate to say that the movement seized control over the means of production of ideas *per se* because the mass media was able to continue its function of counter-revolutionary propaganda unthreatened by the movement. This criticism, amongst others, is made in the text by Grégoire & Perlmán, referred to above (note 10), an account notable for its willingness to engage in self-criticism.

<sup>13</sup> As with all Keynesian programmes which involve concessions, these measures are ambiguous in that they necessarily involve the rationalization of capitalist production and the struggles that result from this. For example, most of these rationalizations were undertaken in order to perform badly-needed restructuring in these sectors; and the implementation of the 39 hour week involved the suppression of certain benefits in working time.

<sup>14</sup> Whilst the government was forced to back-track on certain measures, it did not retreat on all of them. Moreover it did not opt for the Thatcherite model but rather pursued policies which were more consistent with Gaullism. No attempt was made to tear up the social consensus - the unions were kept on board. This point is extremely important because it is only now that the French bourgeoisie are considering emulating their Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

<sup>15</sup> The technological elimination of aspects of the labour process, making redundant whole sections of semi-skilled workers, was combined with an organizational restructuring of the remainder. The fordist labour process had individualized its component workers at distinct work stations connected by the assembly line. The neo-fordist labour process retained the assembly line in order to dictate the pace of work but brought workers back together in groups. By breaking with some of the accumulated rigidity of Taylorism, allowing the groups themselves to organize how to meet the demands imposed by the line, a greater intensity of labour was made possible than under the previous organization as more of the time imbalances between distinct tasks could be eliminated. But the neo-fordist assembly line was not just a technical innovation aimed at quantitative goals. Whilst not completely successful, neo-fordist experiments were deliberately designed to reduce the antagonism between capital and labour which had made the car factories one of the central battlegrounds of the revolt of the 'mass worker'. By taking on board some of the lessons which industrial sociology had distilled from its analysis of the class struggle, the experience of a real increase in the rate of exploitation could beneficently be made less inhuman. The introduction of co-operation not only made the experience of assembly line work less atomizing, in itself reducing the tendency for conflict, but also, by getting the group to internalize and co-operate around the dictates of management, it served to create a new aspect of capitalist control that of the work group over the potentially unruly individual. See Benjamin Coriat 'The restructuring of the assembly line: A new economy of time and control', in *Capital and Class* 11 (summer 1980).

<sup>16</sup> In response to the announcement of several thousand redundancies, workers struck and occupied the factory. Immigrant workers, who comprised 90 per cent of the workforce in some factories, were attacked by scabs and foremen as the struggle against restructuring took place along 'racial' lines. See Sol Picciotto, 'The battles at Talbot-Poissey: Workers' divisions and capital restructuring', in *Capital and Class* 23 (summer 1984). These incidents occurred after a series of conflicts in Citroën factories during which immigrant workers clashed with CGT and CFTD trades unionists.

<sup>17</sup> Although the downward trend in the incidence of strike activity cannot be disputed, exact figures should be viewed with caution. On the one hand they demonstrate the unions' inability to stage symbolic actions as well as a reluctance of workers to take meaningful ones, and on the other the statistics rarely take

account of the number of rank and file conflicts at factory level which neither management nor unions have any interest in publicizing.

<sup>18</sup> The PS and PCF agreed a 'Common Programme' of the left in 1972 in a bid to break the control of the right-wing over parliament. The PCF was still the biggest political party in 1956 but had been in continual decline in opposition since 1947, being gradually overtaken by the PS. Although the PCF renounced the agreement in 1977, a deal was struck between the leaders of the parties for the 1981 elections. Mitterrand won the second round, dissolved the National Assembly and called for elections, and then formed a coalition government in which the PS were the majority. Four ministerial positions were reserved for the PCF including that of Employment Minister, which meant that the CGT came to adopt a less than militant approach in industrial disputes, continually emphasizing the need for negotiations (see the article on the dispute at Talbot-Poissey referred to earlier, note 16) and sabotaging a wildcat strike on the railways in 1984. The PCF withdrew from the government in 1984 following the replacement of 'left-wing' Prime Minister Mauroy with one from the right of the Socialist Party, Laurent Fabius.

<sup>19</sup> When the word *beur* was made fashionable by the media, it was in order to grasp a reality that was escaping them: some individuals were presenting the interesting characteristic of *not really having an identity*. They didn't really feel French, nor really Algerian or Moroccan etc. Without a homeland, full of energy, capable of criticizing each civilization with the values of the other, of rejecting Islamic obscurantism as much as the inhumanity of the modern West: here were people who risked being absolutely un-integratable.' ('Suburbs on fire - The ghetto in the middle', in *Mordicus* 4, April-May 1991).

<sup>20</sup> A clear opposition between white liberals and black/Arab militants would be a gross oversimplification - from the start the *beurs* were not a homogeneous grouping. Following the success of the march against racism, there was a boom in 'beur culture' which principally benefited a new cultural elite, the '*bourgeoisie*', who gained access to the corridors of ministerial power and the circles of the 'caviar left'. Conferences were organized, building on many localized working class initiatives, with a view to gaining representative legitimacy in the eyes of the state, and the movement was split between those seeking to climb the social ladder and those that recognized that, even if this became a real possibility for everyone, it was one which could only ever be realised by an elite few. Since then many blacks and Arabs have joined the political classes, but many have been left as before with nothing to lose by adopting a lifestyle of 'criminality' (*Immigrant Labour, Mass Intellectualty, New Constitution, Post-Fordism and all that*, Red Notes, July 1994).

<sup>21</sup> For a full account of the movement see *France goes off the Rails* (BM Bloob and BM Combustion, London, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> See the leaflets reprinted in *France goes off the Rails*.

<sup>23</sup> Strike committees had also emerged in strikes on the railways in 1978, 1979, 1981 and 1984.

<sup>24</sup> For example Chausson (February-March '88), SNEMCA (spring '88), nurses (March '88 - January '89), and a (relatively) rare strike in the private sector, Peugeot (autumn '89). See *Echanges et Mouvement* 66/67 (January-June '91).

<sup>25</sup> *Echanges et Mouvement* 66/67 (July-December '90).

<sup>26</sup> *Echanges et Mouvement* 66/67 (January-June '91). Regarding the question of recuperation, a critique of the destructive style of rap music which emerged in France in the 1980s as part of the rejection of the left's paranoiac 'assimilation strategy' would be valuable. The fact that the lyrics are not in English imposes restrictions on the size of the market and precludes the emergence of mega-rich 'gangsta-stars' as happened in the US, but nevertheless must lead to the development of hierarchy within the *beurs* movement as much as it unites it around an antagonistic social identity. As for the film 'La Haine', based around the desire of three young *banlieue* residents (one black, one Jewish, and one Arab) to avenge the murder of a mate by a cop, and containing real footage from a riot in a Parisian suburb, to what extent does the spectacularization of the struggle hinder its real development? It is worth noting that there were riots in Nassy le Grand, Le Havre and Rouen during the first fortnight of the film's release, but it is arguable whether these were in any way related to the film or whether they would have happened anyway. The film does not seem to have a particularly pacifying effect: however, in the UK when crowds emerging from a screening in Braxton last year found a riot in full swing following a Brixton Douglass memorial march (killed by cops wielding the new US-style batons) many were not merely content to have consumed the representation of revolt but had been fuelled to seek out the real thing.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Indians of the suburbs' in *Mordicus* 4 for an analysis of Muslim recuperation of the '91 riots.

<sup>28</sup> See 'The co-ordinating committees in France: A new form of organisation in the class struggle' in *Echanges et Mouvement* 72/73 (January-February '93).

<sup>29</sup> The elimination of stock inventories in favour of parts being delivered 'just-in-time', and extending this principle throughout the factory, served to increase the discipline imposed by the requirements of the production process upon each worker, and thus of this alienated collectivity on individual workers (see note 15).

<sup>30</sup> The 'just-in-time' disciplinary regime is itself highly dependent upon a well disciplined workforce - a system which works through the establishment of its own preconditions - and thus highly vulnerable when disruptions do occur.

Having served to reduce the incidence of strikes these developments in the capitalist labour process have also served to increase their potential impact. An interesting analysis of this vulnerability, prompted by a dispute with similarities to the one being considered here, the Spanish lorry drivers dispute of 1990, was included in the June '91 edition of the Barcelona based magazine *Eletereta*, and translated as 'Dispersed Fordism and a New Organisation of Labour' in *Here & Now* 13.

Unlike sterling, the franc had been able to withstand the kind of intense speculative pressure which led in Britain's case to Black Wednesday and the exit of the pound from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). According to the socialist government's figures, growth was at 1.8 - 2 per cent p.a. (greater than that of all its competitors except for Japan), inflation down to 2.4 per cent, and the public spending deficit down to 2.7 per cent of GDP. The franc had been stable against the Deutschmark since 1987, income tax was at its lowest for 25 years, and the number of strikes down to a post-war record low. See *The Economist*, 21st November 1992.

<sup>42</sup> The apparent strength of the French economy (see previous note) had been bolstered by the economic boom that had followed German unification. The failure to stem the rise in eastern German wages towards levels paid to western German workers, together with the generous rates of conversion of Ostmarks into Deutschmarks, had created an inflationary surge in consumer demand in Germany that French industry had been well placed to meet. However, the failure to both stem the levelling up of eastern German wages and make the western German working class pay directly the full costs of unification had meant that the Bundesbank, as the last line of defence against inflation and the erosion of profitability, had little option but to pursue a tight monetary policy. The Bundesbank steadfastly maintained high German interest rates even at the cost of triggering the exchange rate crisis that wrecked the ERM on what became known as Black Wednesday. By late 1992, this counter-inflationary policy had begun to take its full effect with a sharp slow down in the German economy. Having weathered the storm on the exchange rate markets, with the franc remaining firmly tied to the Deutschmark in the ERM, France found itself not only at a significant competitive disadvantage with regard to those countries such as the UK, Spain and Italy who had devalued following Black Wednesday, but also tied to a stagnating German economy. As a result, the French economy went into reverse: having grown by nearly two per cent in 1992 it shrank by over one per cent in the first quarter of 1993 alone.

<sup>43</sup> A chronology of events and analysis is contained in the winter 1993 edition of *Mordicus*. A translation into English has been produced by 56a Infoshop, London.

<sup>44</sup> The plethora of struggles which followed the Air France strike, including many wildcat strikes, is catalogued in *Collective Action Notes* 34.

<sup>45</sup> The significance of this demonstration is explored in 'Circuit breakers broken' by Echanges et Mouvement, in *Nous Sommes Tous Des Casseurs* (see note 37 below).

<sup>46</sup> The CIP was, like many divisive social security reforms in the UK, aimed specifically at those under 25 years old. It applied to school leavers still unemployed after six months, who would receive vocational training in return for this reduced wage, and to those holding a *baccalauréat* and two years further education starting their first job.

<sup>47</sup> *The Economist*, 12th March 1994.

<sup>48</sup> It is impossible for justice to this movement in the few lines which an introduction to a subsequent movement allows. It is therefore strongly recommended that readers try to get hold of *Nous Sommes Tous Des Casseurs*. This pamphlet includes various translations which provide a detailed account and analysis of the movement and deserves a wider circulation than it has so far received. It should be available from AK Press. The movement is also dealt with in *Immateral Labour, Mass Intellectualty, New Constitution, Post Fordism and all that*, Red Notes, July 1994. This pamphlet is nigh impossible to get hold of as well. Readers could try writing to Red Notes.

<sup>49</sup> Since '68 the state has made significant efforts to evacuate proletarian social life from the centre of Paris, filling it with Culture. For example, the Pompidou Centre was built on one of the few areas of central Paris in which the working class could afford to live. To be sure, the state has had a degree of success in this strategy - social movements have of late failed to focus themselves in the heart of the capital, with the resultant feeling that the movements have somehow been less significant for it. But when unruly proletarians do manage to reconquer the territory from which they have been excluded, as in the case of this movement, the treasures to be recovered by looting are all the richer for it.

<sup>50</sup> Despite a network of student organisations supposedly putting a coherent case ... the past few days have shown that the movement, dominated by high schools and polytechnics, is headless, spontaneous, decentralized and ready to explode. *The Guardian*, 31st March 1994.

<sup>51</sup> Press photographs of looters found their way onto notice boards in police stations throughout Paris. See *The Independent*, 6th April 1994, for more on this subject.

<sup>52</sup> It is worth remembering that the general strike in May '68 came out of a day of protest at the brutality of the cops' assault on the barricades of the 'student movement'.

<sup>42</sup> See *Collective Action Notes* for a chronology of struggles in France. This makes quite clear the contrast in the level of strike activity between France and the UK.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *The Economist*, 14th October 1995.

<sup>45</sup> There had been a gradual *rapprochement* between the unions which culminated in 1995 with an end to the intermimic conflicts which had broken out following the end of the 'Union of the Left' in 1977. The collapse of Stalinism reduced the significance of the CGT's attachment to the PCF and raised questions about the FO's *raison d'être*, whilst the CFDT had increasingly distanced itself from the PS since Mitterand's 1988 re-election. The CGT's general secretary received a warm welcome at the CFDT's conference in March, whilst its symbolic handshake with Marc Blondel of the FO was a first since the split in 1947. But the main factor was a greater desire for unity at rank-and-file level in response to the evident weakness of each union. A notable feature of the days of action in November and December 1995 was that workers from all the unions (as well as those from none at all, of course) participated regardless of which union had organized it.

<sup>46</sup> The universities in Paris are funded more generously than those in the provinces, where the student movement, like the subsequent workers' movement, was more impressive in relative scale.

<sup>47</sup> Although the Liberation government introduced a comprehensive system of social protection, it emerged as a far from universal system but one which is a strongly particularistic tangle of administrative units. Each of the general, specific, basic and supplementary schemes that make up the social security system is separately administered by a council representing both unions and employers. Each has responsibility for collecting contributions and paying out benefits. Perhaps the most important aspect from the present point of view is that this financing is done on a current-funding or pay-as-you-go basis - each year's receipts from workers' contributions go out immediately in payments to the retired, ill, or injured. This means that, unlike in the UK where social security is funded out of general taxation, imbalances are immediately visible. Thus the talk of 'bankruptcy' in France compared with the message of an 'unsustainable burden' in the UK. However the crisis in the welfare budget manifests itself, the state needs a degree of control in order to impose restructuring.

<sup>48</sup> In Steve Jefferys, 'France 1995: The backward march of labour halted', in *Capital & Class* 59 (summer 1996).

<sup>49</sup> This seems to represent an important breakthrough, not only in its effectiveness, but also in bringing beautifully on to the social terrain what has previously been a very individualized form of resistance (i.e. the hacker).

<sup>50</sup> The miners in the Lorraine basin were attacked by the cops, however. After the cops tear-gassed a peaceful rally and beat up 30 strikers at Houillères, the miners kidnapped the local mayor and held him down a mine shaft for thirteen hours. The next day 2,000 miners were met by 1,000 cops and further running battles ensued. In Merlebach on December 8th, 4,000 miners with helmets, protective eye-glasses, gas masks, armed with pick-axes, steel cable, explosive *pétards* and molotovs fought for a day and a half continuously with the CRS, successfully burning down a building. State violence was also targeted at those strikes which persisted after the majority had returned to work, as we shall see below.

<sup>51</sup> *The Economist*, 27th January 1996.

<sup>52</sup> It has been pointed out, however, that much of the circulation process of capital occurs electronically. Telecom strikers apparently identified the possibility of paralysing this aspect of the process as well, but it did not happen in this strike, partly due to kind of respectful taboo amongst telecom employees, partly due to a whole range of repressive disciplinary measures aimed precisely at interference with the means of electronic communication.

<sup>53</sup> Strikes continued over Marseille demands in the Marseilles transport authority and Caen post office. Despite the use of the CRS to evict strikers from occupied premises and escort scabs, resulting in violent clashes, these strikes were successful.

<sup>54</sup> Tactical retreat: Costing Juppé's concessions', *The Economist*, 16th December 1995.

<sup>55</sup> 'France risks new unrest', *The Guardian*, 3rd May 1996.



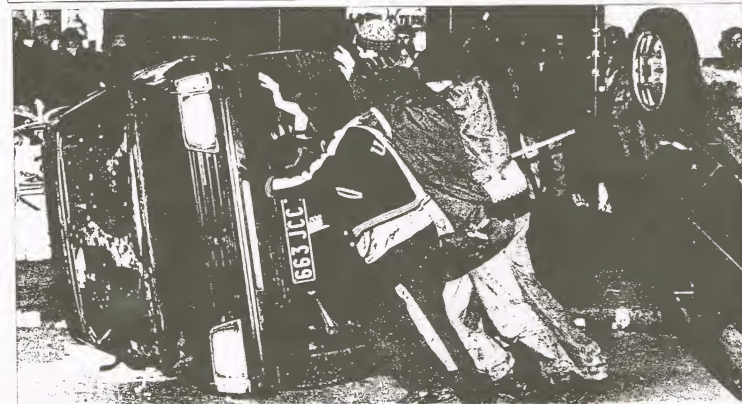


## Intakes: 'Together we can invent a future'<sup>1</sup>

Documents from the movement of winter '95

Our *Intakes* section in this issue of *Aufheben* comprises a selection of documents produced in France around the time of the movement of winter '95. The first six pieces below were mainly produced as leaflets, in December last year. We have chosen these from the dozens of leaflets we came across on the basis of the insights they offer into how those involved understood the movement at the time. Some, such as 'Now or Never' convey the overall feel of the movement; others are more critical and analytical - in particular 'Beware, One Striking Train may Conceal Another'. Finally, 'Last (but not least) Exit to the Strike', is a lively illustration of the relationship between workers and bosses towards the end of the rail strike.

The final three pieces were articles written around January 1996, at the end of the strike movement. The first, 'The Strike and After', was written by a printer-cum-proofreader in Paris involved in the strike in his workplace. The article describes some of the radical tendencies of the movement, but suggests that as a whole the movement was limited by the failure to grasp the function of work and the role of the state. The writer describes the new forms of insubordination against state power which developed, and points to the need to clarify a critique of the unions. The second article, 'France End of 1995: Anger and Huge Strikes', was written by 'M' in Athens, for a foreign readership. The piece analyses the defensive nature of the strike movement. Unlike the 'offensive' of 1968, here was a movement defending prior gains in the face of the march of economic liberalization. The final article, 'On the Eve of Battle', was written by a train driver in the Paris region. The article is a vivid account of the experiences of solidarity and creativity within the movement, and of the conflicts both between the movement and its opponents and among different participants within the movement - particularly trade union players.



### ONE MORE EFFORT!

The government which came to office in May promised change and to fight against social fracture. Finally, we have had the police state and the awakening of social antagonism by the mass of waged and casual workers and the unemployed.

From the foundation of the *Vigipirate* (government plan to prevent terrorism), to the social security reform plans, only three months have passed. Three months during which the state, after having pursued the 'Islamists', is now attacking public sector

workers. The objective is to set up one section of the population as the enemy within.

The anti-terrorism plans are designed to reassure people by pointing a finger at anyone who looks like an immigrant. With the Juppé reforms it is civil servants who are denounced as the privileged who want to keep hold of their privileges.

Between the two, there are a mass of citizens held hostage in a no-man's land in which the silence only seems like proof of a tacit acceptance of the current political situation.

In the case of the anti-terrorism plan, this device has worked rather well: voices have barely been raised, there has been little resistance to the increase in controls, arrests, expulsions the cities and outlying areas. Only certain suburbs have been the site of clashes in a situation already tense for several years. But as the young people in the cities have been well aware, far from hunting down terrorists, the anti-terrorist measures are aimed primarily at the domestication of new dangerous classes stuck in certain districts and on the edge of the big cities. *Vigipirate* is the policing aspect of the crisis which is being imposed on unstable populations.

The social security reform plan is participating in the same politics of generalized policing for those who cannot afford the medicine of wealth: photos on social security cards, obligatory health

books, advance payment for health care for 'foreigners'. But above all the attack on 'social gains' and corporatism is a question of breaking down the last bastions which are protected from the crisis and reaching the final stage of the long road of neo-liberal enterprise of the last fifteen years. The restructuring of the process of production must not remain at the doors of the public sector. In order to reach it, the Chirac state is ready for anything. Including mobilizing the army and giving rise to the creation of so-called passenger committees.

The policing, the firm and scornful 'no' confronting the strikers are the sign of the reinforcing of the state's authority which appeals to a sense of history to eradicate what remains for us of revolt. So comrades, one more time, it's now or never!

Contact: La Bonne Descente, Paris

## NOW OR NEVER!

The growing social movement gives us, for the first time for ages, the opportunity to create our own history. Without opposing some reform or other, the students are rebelling against misery, against the empty hole of the future, against the society which has dug this hole. Led at first by unions scared of losing their breaks, hundreds and thousands of workers have today thrown themselves into a strike which goes beyond opposition to the Juppé plan. When the demands multiply, when the transport workers remain mobilized, when the postal workers go on strike, when the Air France workers are on the runways again, we can feel that the submission to sacrifice, after twenty years of fighting the crisis, is finally in the process of being broken... When the metro workers' strike means that the *Vigipirate* plan is out of the question... When, as in Marseilles, the unemployed lead the front of the demo... When, as in Jussieu, the 'youth from the suburbs' and students join to defend themselves against the cops... When students and permanent and casual workers meet on demos and in assemblies... When, as in Toulouse, the students come to help

strikers stop the buses... When the categories which imprison us disappear... That's when a *generalized social revolt* takes shape against the capitalist order.

On the other side, the Prime Sinister and his Notat, the boss of the professional left, all chant the usual blackmail to us: 'We must adapt to survive in the World Market'.

In the face of a government which is playing all their cards, everyone senses that, behind today's struggle, is the risk of serious defeat, followed by social regression *for everyone*.

Will the Law of Economics condemn us to this? Let's smash the laws! So that we can struggle, speak to each other, and imagine other ways of living together.

We must take back the time that wage slavery has stolen from us.

Long live the GENERAL STRIKE!

A country which is entirely on strike is a new world shaping itself!

## THE MOMENT HAS COME... IF IT ESCAPES US WE WON'T FIND IT AGAIN FOR A LONG TIME.

anonymous poster on the walls of Toulon, 23 March 1989

Behind the specific demands there is often a general feeling of dissatisfaction, of having had enough. The profound misery of the majority of the population derives from not being able to express the fact of their isolation.

Everyone who finds themselves stuck in their roles as unemployed, casual workers... are today in the position many will find themselves in tomorrow.

These past few days we have been demonstrating with the strikers.

We are convinced that the present turmoil is asking for more than it is letting on. We hear the refusal of the deterioration of living conditions, the refusal of the usury produced by the constraints of money, the refusal of the erosion of everything that makes a human being a being who does not take it lying down.

This refusal bursts through the surface of specific demands here and there.

In many towns, demos have not been so big for three generations.

In Merlebach, Orly, Nantes, Paris, Montpellier, Sainte Etienne... strikers, demonstrators rise up against the police armada deployed to defend the commodity, to contain people coming together, to prevent people meeting each other and talking, to neutralize the struggle.

In the street, in the places where there are strikes, waged workers, unemployed, students are starting to talk. In Nantes, Montpellier, Paris, the demonstrators refuse to disperse, occupy the street, seek places to be together.

In Clermont-Ferrand, railworkers invite other strikers and passengers to a banquet in the station. The following week, they organize a ball...

In several towns, EDF (electricity) workers put the electricity onto the cheap rate.

Others restore the electricity to EDF sources. Elsewhere, striking postal workers ensure a minimal service for the unemployed, people on benefits... And all other initiatives which have happened in silence or been twisted by media corrosion.

This confrontation which sets the people in opposition to the state has already claimed its victims - those who attack objects: cars, dustbins, cameras, shop windows, riot shields... have bled, been dragged to the courts, imprisoned.

- One year's prison sentence for a shop window and two shirts in Montpellier...

- Three months for the destruction of a table in Paris...

- Two months for overturning two cars in Paris...

## Aufheben

*Casseurs?* These are students, the unemployed, the homeless, waged workers, teachers...They are all expressing a general anger, like the miners of Merlebach or the strikers of Orly.

To demand liberation and amnesty for all the demonstrators is to refuse false divisions: public sector workers, private sector workers, *casseurs* and demonstrators, waged workers and the unemployed, strikers and passengers...

Combating the fear, the fear of tomorrow, of the unknown, of the self, of others, of losing what little we have...

Reversing the situation against those who sustain it, getting our confidence back, giving ourselves the means to meet each other,

in the workplace, in the job centres, the universities, schools, or other places, by opening them up...inviting people in...?

Divided, we are conquered. Our power lies in meeting together.

*Just because it's raining cats and dogs, that's no reason to stop pissing.*

Paris, 10 December 1995

## WHAT DO WE WANT?

*What do we want?*

Not difficult to know: it's enough to listen to what's being said, not in the anti-chambers or screens of power, but in the processions and the bars, in the occupied stations and the individual modes of transport that have been joyfully collectivized.

*We want to talk*

For the twenty years that the 'crisis' has lasted, we have been told that it's very complicated, that we don't understand anything about it, in short, that we must make sacrifices, that is the price of economic progress. Now, what do we see? The only real crisis is that of a system which rests on the exploitation of wage labour: *There is less and less work, while there is more and more wealth.* It is the system and its pseudo-rationality that is in crisis, that's what we want to talk about.

*We want to get away from the categories that imprison us*

In transforming privileged work, we have been isolated in categories which are supposed to oppose each other to defend or reclaim the morsels of privilege: private salaries against public, against CDI, unemployed against workers, homeless against those who live in rabbit hutches, with the homeless to call everyone who waits for them if they are not wise. It is against this society of generalized blackmail that we have been set in movement. It's against this tendency to increasingly set everyone against each other that we have

started to reunite. Railworkers, posties, students, teachers, unemployed etc. have met at strikes with an ease, a confidence, a desire to listen never seen until now. While eating, singing, drinking and resisting police intimidation, we have discovered a new way of being together. Those who have started to talk are numerous, no longer under the title of their category, but under the title of human. Thousands of people whom the system has separated have woven lines between each other: *This is the main benefit that we have gained in this struggle, and we will fight to keep it*

*We want to keep the strong position*

Already, we have succeeded in putting the brakes on the triumphant rationality of the capitalist economy. No, the movement is not finished. It's up to us to develop the newest elements it has brought:

Let's get away from our categories!  
Let's get away from our workplaces to go and meet others!  
Let's transform places of pain into places for parties!  
Let's take other places, pleasant and heated, and open them to everyone, included and excluded!  
Why oblige the SDF to sleep in metro stations? Let's occupy the national palaces!  
**All possibilities are still open to us!**

*From those without categories*

mid-December 1995

Contact: La Bonne Descente

## BEWARE, ONE STRIKING TRAIN MAY CONCEAL ANOTHER

The purpose of a social movement is to continually overthrow aspects of a situation and transform the certitudes of yesterday into the doubts of today and to supply tomorrow's questions. As the relations of power evolve, problems pose themselves with more clarity. The questions raised by the present strike movement are decisive for what follows.

Today the strike has a grip on almost the totality of the public sector. At the same time - at least in Paris - student agitation seems to be having difficulty in transforming itself into a true movement. A minority is engrossed in an assemblyist activism which cannot go beyond the corporatist framework controlled by the unions. The real relations between delegates, students and co-ordinations are being masked by clashes between groupuscules at the heart of co-ordinations which are gradually losing all credibility and are only co-ordinating manipulative projects. The activism of this minority only survives thanks to the new breath brought by the strikes of waged workers. Despite the energy of a few put into making political proposals, despite the radicalization of one section of students, this 'movement' has not been capable, up to now, of going beyond its corporatism, of inventing or liberating a subversive creativity.

In the striking public sector, some aspects are also appearing in a new light. The movement has been set in motion at the grassroots level and is carried by a profound sense of discontent which has existed for a long time in society. However, the great majority of workers seem to have become consumers of their own strike: active participation is being left to union militants. In some cases only collective engagement has been preserved. Whatever it is, the volume of the movement has already carried a dynamic which transcends the initial objectives. In the face of the brutality of the choice of power - which is as determined as the strikers themselves - one can examine the state of the strengths of the movement and its perspectives. Globally, the strike remains under the control of the unions, even if the delegates seem to carry a determining weight. The unions are the only ones negotiating the market which presents itself as the 'reasonable' issue in the conflict. The dawning of the great day of class struggle is necessary for capitalists to measure the situation and to define the framework of a new 'general interest'. A confrontation of this order does not displease them, as long as the market can regulate itself in a friendly manner. The unions also need this struggle to reinvigorate themselves just when they are at their



worst. The form taken by this conflict is an indirect consequence of the crisis in French syndicalism and the urgent necessity for it to regain a minimal ability to represent. This weakness in syndicalism is also the strength of the movement. Recently especially, the strikers are showing themselves to be very open, concerned about what is happening elsewhere in society. They have been capable of extending their struggle from their own strength, leaving their places of exploitation in order to meet other waged workers and to persuade them to join them. And there are many who support the students in struggle.

The absence of forms of organization capable of expressing the determination and new aspirations of the struggle is the movement's main weakness. It explains the passive attitude of one section of proletarians. This absence is even more remarkable given that the isolated struggles of the preceding years had seen the birth of numerous autonomous organizations. Today any generalization of strikes is for the profit of the unions, further reinforcing their capacity for negotiation. From now on the lack of the movement's autonomy in the face of the union apparatus will bring its defeat. If the movement is not capable of transcending itself and creating independent organizations, uniting with those who are unionized or non-unionized, it will also be incapable of connecting with workers from the private sector, who have become, for now, hostages of the bosses. It will no longer be a question of struggling against the 'selling out' of the movement by the unions. It will be too late. The union leaders and the powers that be will share the fruits of all our energy and generosity. Those who submit to this today will be held responsible for it tomorrow. From now on only the transcending of

the leadership of the unions can put the strikes, and the youth in struggle in the universities and schools onto a new level.

The opening out of the struggle towards others by the strikers is one of the strengths of the movement. It allows those who fight alone against the capitalist order to express themselves and to confront their opinions. It is the only activity which seems to me to have any sense today.

**INSURRECTION!**

**GENERAL STRIKE!**

**No, the railworkers are not privileged!**

**No, the railworkers are not responsible for the financial hole in the SNCF (railways)!**

**The state is responsible - let it pay! It's got the money!**

**Yes, each worker repays more than 6000F per month in interest to the banks.**

**Revolt is good!**

**Railworkers**

**local union - Northern Paris**

23 November 1995

*A rebel without frontiers*

## LAST (BUT NOT LEAST) EXIT TO THE STRIKE. END OF THE STRIKE IN NIMES

Tuesday 19 December 1995

Since Friday the media have been chanting the same chant about the 'tendency of a return to work', 'the strike is suffocating', 'the general assemblies are becoming angry', 'railway depots are voting for a return to work'. On Saturday 16th December, they were proved right: the Strasbourg depot voted for a return to work. The next day this general assembly voted again for strike action: this fact was for the most part not mentioned.

For some days, the union confederations have made an awful come back. They began certain negotiations with ministers. On the night of Saturday/Sunday, a fax sent from the minister of transport arrives in all the depots via the unionists. 'The *contrat de plan* is frozen'. Pensions are not being touched. All the reforms which concern the railworkers are delayed until later.' The return of corporatism. (During the entire time of the strikes, the men of the state and their collaborators have maintained that the movement was corporatist and political in order to denigrate it. The state and the unions have been busy making of it what they would like it to be and what it was not.) The return of confederations is the return of the traditional union order: channelling, falsification, demagoguery. It is the return to injunctions and threats to the local union branches who have been a part of the strike everywhere as an extended inter-union whatever union they belonged to.

On the afternoon of 19th December railworkers in Nimes vote for a 'suspension of the strike'. The last step towards achieving 'mutual aid', as they say, the movement of negotiations are engaged with the local leadership of the **SNCF** on this theme: for each worker who leaves, another will be hired (whether they retire or are moved).

A large rectangular table was placed in a room under the station. The principal director, surrounded by directors of related services, as well as the union delegates (CGT, CFDT, FO) and, standing, encircling this conventional intimacy, 200 railworkers. The local director, (who is called M. Verité which means Mr. Truth

in French), does not manage to get in touch with the regional director of Montpellier on his mobile phone. He declares that his plans of hiring will not be questioned again and will follow the procedures previously fixed.

Scattered conversations with some railworkers explain this demand by the fact that for them it is not a question of calling to be hired in order to deal with a lack of staff on certain posts, but of 'giving a job to someone who is unemployed'. 'We are not fighting for our little SNCF. We are fighting for our children, for everyone. We are fighting for all those who can no longer fight, in the private sector and elsewhere.' 'We voted for a suspension of the strike because we want to spend the holidays peacefully, so that people can travel. To gather strength. In any case, the general assemblies have already been called out for the beginning of January.' Another who declared himself non-unionized regrets that the strike was suspended: 'It shouldn't be stopped like that. After three weeks, they are going to think we're tired.' And he starts speaking with a vaguely sing-song tone to no-one in particular: 'You're tired...' And everyone responds: 'We're not tired...'

There is excitement in the room. For two hours, the railworkers chat and tease each other. The director says that he will telephone again. He is left alone with his mobile. Ten minutes go by and he returns to the room. No news from Montpellier. One railworker declares: 'You'd better tell them something in Montpellier. And that is that there are two hundred of us in the room, that you're in the middle of us and that we have no intention of letting you leave.' The director: 'Are you holding me hostage?' The railworker: 'That's exactly it.' The director demands some time to telephone again. A train conductor explodes: 'Verité, you're nothing but an arsehole, you're really taking us for a load of bloody idiots. One phone call to Montpellier only means that the financiers gain thousands in one second. Verité, I'm going to kill you(!) if you carry on.' His colleagues rush towards him. 'Calm down, calm down, come outside for a breath of fresh air.' The CGT delegate speaks: 'You see

M. Verité, until now the strike was dignified and responsible. You see what's going to happen. You're going to have to deal with a strike which we can no longer control, and you alone will be responsible.' One railworker cuts short the Stalinist speech. 'Right, that's enough. We're going to look for equipment, and we're going to lock the door of the room with Verité in it. Then we'll solder the doors of the depot. I propose that we vote for or against going back out on strike. 'We'll vote! We'll vote!' The delegates huddle among the railworkers. 'Who is in favour of the strike?' All the hands go up followed by a jovial, 'Everyone together! Everyone together!' One railworker who has remained outside proposes to some others that they find the director's car and set fire to it. Another, who had arrived with cans of beer on a trolley, proposes saving the empty bottles. 'They make good missiles, you never know.' A gang comes out of the room and invites everyone to blockade the two trains that are about to leave. 'Everyone together! Processions in the stations. Trolleys are thrown onto the tracks. Some railworkers get onto the trains, firmly make the conductors leave and let off the alarms. Beautiful music. Another gang decides to shut the station. They get hold of bars, rods, trolleys, and run around the station. They block the doors and set up barricades. The average man in the street is surprised after hearing the TV and the radio announce that the strike is finished everywhere. One passenger says: 'The press, they really are a bunch of liars.' And everyone proclaims 'Everyone together! Everyone together!' Everyone is smiling, especially the railworkers. Everyone goes in front of the room. 'Why didn't you come to the general assemblies, they were open to everyone. Everyone could speak. There were unemployed people, teachers, kids from the electricity board, from Cacharel, the homeless, secondary schoolkids, housewives who all spoke.' The CGT delegate starts speaking again: 'Comrades, we know how to remain dignified, we have shown that we are responsible and proud of our company. We have known how to resist all provocations and we will continue to resist them. The attitude of the directors is a provocation. We will not respond to it.' This wanker had barely finished when everyone applauded and started again 'Everyone together!' etc.

Provocation? Where? When?

The delegate goes into a dark corner. He also has a mobile phone and is probably calling his own boss. Long conversation.

Return to the room. The director has not moved. Some railworkers have gone to find the passengers who are in the blockaded trains. The room fills up with children, young people carrying bags, women old people. One railworker states that the passengers 'are with us' and he describes Verité as responsible for the situation. 'Tell him what you think.' One woman manages to

approach him. 'Monsieur, they're right, you should accept what they are demanding.' The whole room: 'Everyone together! Everyone together!'

Journalists from the local paper arrive. One striker tells them, from the back of the room: 'Watch it boys, we've clocked your faces and we're going to read the paper tomorrow; if you lie again we'll find you.' The journalists stare at their feet. Insults and piss-takes fly in the direction of the director. There is a jokey atmosphere.

Everyone comes out again, and no-one is left in the room except for the unionists and the directors. Outside, there is talk of other depots which have, it seems, relaunched the strike over the same issues. Some of them are telling their families, their children. 'It's pointless to think only of yourself.' Others regret the fact that the private sector has not joined the strike. 'It was an opportunity for them. If they haven't done it now, when will they do it?' Another describes the job of his cousin in a private company and says that everyone is fed up, that everything has to change, that the private sector will come out too: 'They have to.' I talk about the miners of Freyling-Merlebach who attacked public buildings, the police and set fire to the directors' offices. The railworker replies: 'With them it's not the same, it's a question of survival.' 'A question of survival? It's a question of survival for us as well, you can see the kind of world they're trying to make.'

Return to the room. The director is there as well as the CGT. The director: 'Messieurs, I've just been speaking to Montpellier. The regional director is in agreement. For each worker who leaves another is hired for the next three months.' The delegate starts to speak: 'You understand clearly what M. Verité has just said. For each person who leaves, one is hired for the period of renegotiation of the *contrat de plan*. We're going to vote for or against the strike.' Cheers of 'We've won!' etc. The noise stops. One railworker: 'Look! That's not the same thing, what the delegate and the director say.' Murmuring in the room. The delegate becomes smaller. The director comes to shake his hand: 'During the period of the *contrat de plan*, one leaves, one is hired.' When the Stalinist smiles again the whole room starts with: 'We've won, etc.' It gets quieter again and another railworker: 'No, no! That's not how it happens. Verité must sign now. He's already stitched us up.' Verité says: 'I'll sign tomorrow during the negotiations which are planned with the unions.' 'No, you sign now. One point that's all.' The room is filled with as much laughter as the Stalinist and the director are green. 'Paper for Verité. This is the moment of truth (Verité)' etc. And of course a railworker: 'No! Verité has signed but not the other directors, they must sign as well.' One of the directors states that he cannot be involved. 'We don't give a toss, you sign and if those above you don't agree with it, well, you



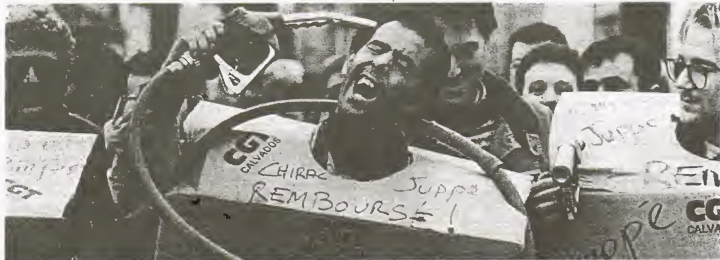


can jump, you're nothing but a fuse.' The guy complies. The delegate breathes a sigh of relief and in a beautiful outburst: 'Comrades, we've just had a beautiful victory. I think that the moment has come to re-vote with responsibility and dignity. I propose that we call off the strike.' One conductor proposes not the stopping of the strike but its suspension. Everyone agrees with using this expression. Unanimous voting for suspension. 'We've won!' 'Everyone together!' etc.

Everyone leaves. In the car park adjacent to the room, red fireworks burn and envelop the atmosphere in smoke. Various conversations, and paradoxically, an atmosphere of bitterness and sadness. One railworker says to me: 'What a bummer, I'll have to go to work tomorrow. I really don't feel like it...' Another says: 'You say we've won. We've only won the pleasure of making the directors bend a little bit and it's really miserable. We want so much more. We want more from this society.' But this kind of talk is articulated among only a few even though everyone thinks it. There is nobody to say it loud and strong, speech is left up to the professionals, the unionists. I start to be more annoyed with the attitude of the anonymous railworkers who are getting excited in small groups and

losing themselves in jokes than with the unions who are going about their usual business which everyone expects of them. The delegate takes the microphone and tries to turn the impressions upside down. 'Comrades, we have achieved a great victory there. We achieved this victory by virtue of our sense of responsibility. We have come out bigger through this. This strike will have been exemplary in its calmness and dignity.' He begins to applaud. A delegate from the FO says: 'It's true we've won. But nothing is finished. The general assemblies will take place at the beginning of January to make the point.' The applause gets warmer. Some railworkers with whom I'd been chatting and whose hands I'd shaken when the station had been closed pushed me towards the microphone: 'Everyone here knows that I'm not a railworker. I represent no-one. What I want to say is: Thanks. Thanks for fighting for everyone, for having given expressed the feelings in this country where for years and years we haven't stopped taking it lying down. Thanks for having given us back the desire and the taste of talking and talking to each other. Thanks and see you soon.' 'Everyone together, everyone together', the railworkers replied. Even the CGT applauded. Some railworkers hugged me. For one moment... I disappeared into the darkness. Some railworkers joined me again and asked me how they could get in touch with me again. I leave my address.

The next day, at a final, poxy demo, I will meet up with a railworker who will say to me: 'This morning at work, there was no joy. No-one felt like working. We were changed. Imagine, for 23 days, I had never taken so much pleasure in going to the depot. And I've been working at the SNCF for fifteen years. My wife moaned a bit, she didn't see much of me. That's to be expected. But the atmosphere was extraordinary. We didn't want it to stop. When you see the unions saying that it's a beautiful victory, not one railworker thinks that. We lost, that's it. We won nothing. But morale is good. Above all, we are really angry now. When people say we suspended the strike, it's not to show off. The strike has been suspended. We'll wait for the new year holiday to pass. And afterwards we'll start again. Everyone is saying so.' I bring up the attitude of the railworker who had threatened to attack the director the day before: 'Of course he's right. Everyone thinks the same. They really don't give a toss about us. But we mustn't give in to these bastards. That weakens us. As if we don't already have enough to defend.' We speak of situations where there is nothing left to say. We speak of the running of the trains by strikers themselves and for free. 'It's a long running debate amongst us. We can do it. The problem is that we are prosecuted. As long as the movement is strong, we can hold out, the conductors and the others are risking nothing. But when the movement gets weaker, the cops will come and nick people who they pick out and isolate. So...The movement must always exist. It's not simple of course.'





## The Strike and After

## Foreword

The following text has no pretension of drawing the full picture of the 1995 winter crisis on the scale of the whole country, but of giving my point of view based on my own reflection and my own, very modest, participation in the movement of insubordination in Paris. Its aim is not to end discussion but, on the contrary, to encourage the opening up of debate amongst those who intend going further than just recording events. To understand today the advances as well as the failures seems essential - in order to avoid being tossed about by unseen situations tomorrow.

'To reflect is not to genuflect.'

Whatever the admirers of neo-liberal democracy might think, capitalism at the end of this century is the inverse of the image it presents. Behind the humanitarian mask appears the increasingly implacable inhumanity of exploitation and domination. The aggravated capitalization of life generates horrors without end to such an extent that, in the most civilized countries it is henceforth difficult to regard them as contingent and temporary.

From the point of view of the masters of this world, the World Bank being the appointed manager, many things remain to be done to crush their slaves and give free reign to their all-consuming ambitions: to devastate the planet and let loose the domesticating power of capital. For the factions in power in France it is necessary to get it over with - and quickly. They are impelled by the expiry dates for European integration, and in a more general way, by the requirements of the world market for which they are, in the final analysis, only acting as proxies. But it was enough for state employees to demonstrate their refusal to submit for the well-oiled machine, set in primed motion by the present managers, to begin to seize up.

For the leadership of the trade unions, who are always hostile to individual and collective initiatives which escape their control, the decision to call a strike was the result of exhausting negotiations conducted with all the pedantry and ceremony proper to democracy with the objective of gaining credibility from people concerned. But individuals not lacking in decision already know from experience that the formal unanimity thus achieved doesn't signify anything in itself. Without waiting for the approval of all their still hesitant comrades, they not only went on strike but also began to seize the signal control centres.

Such initiatives were denounced by the SNCF management as irresponsible acts 'which put the security of the rail network and equipment at risk' whereas it is them who have been responsible for numerous railway catastrophes on the lines which don't pay - by letting them fall into disrepair. In reality, such acts reveal the vulnerability of the transport network which is more and more centralized and computerized. The generalization of the latest technology is at once the source of the power and the general weakness of the system. It is an arm of capital to domesticate humans and to render their presence more and more obsolete. At the same time, all that was necessary was for a handful of individuals to occupy the control centres and signal power boxes, carry out some basic acts of sabotage, like erasing the computer memory, for the network to be paralysed in its entirety.

The leadership of the trade unions viewed with suspicion the first spontaneous outbursts which took place without their approval and which would have enormous unforeseen consequences. For those responsible for labour power, work is life itself and a strike is merely one of the unfortunate means the wardens of survival are sometimes obliged to use in order to attain their desired end. They do not understand that to stop work, even in a momentary fashion, forms

part of the pleasures of life even though it absorbs a lot of energy and you lose money sometimes.

For a great deal of the strikers, the strike, on average, was set to become an end in itself. An activity breaking with the everyday. It allowed heads to be lifted up and the cycle of resignation to be broken, to break somewhat, trade separation, to speak, to party, to demonstrate in the street and - and why not? - to feast with the people in the neighbourhood, which, by the way, happened much more on the fringes than in the centre of Paris, now being transformed into a museum and into a commercial centre for luxury goods.

The holders of state power, apologists for social Darwinism, have denounced such unwillingness as the 'corporatism of the privileged worker'; in short, as a survival reflex of antediluvian species unable to adapt. This view has nothing new about it. It dates from some fifteen years ago when the workers in traditional industries resisted, sometimes very violently, their disappearance ... a primordial situation in order to bring the stubborn under control and permit the reconversion of capital.

The workers in state industries like the SNCF are, by tradition, marked by corporatism and underpinned by professional pride. But when the initiators of the first strikes affirmed that they were 'striking for themselves but also for all proletarians waged and unwaged', they showed that they were overcoming their habitual shopkeepers' outlook which had caused so much wrong during the preceding strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986.

The content of the first intense discussions held, as often as not, in cafés as well as in assemblies, showed that there had been some subterranean maturation well before the outbreak of the strike. The majority were, to be sure, mainly preoccupied with the many questions relating to the status of the state workers. But a more conscious and determined minority went much further and attempted to tackle all the problems of daily survival. The responses were very confused, tainted with ideology and the language of pure democracy,<sup>3</sup> but one felt a critical reflection, a search for real perspectives which would permit 'the human to be replaced at the centre against the dictatorship of the market', beyond capital's inhuman categories and the separations and roles which accompany them.

Thus, the strikers at SNCF, telecom, RATP (metro) and even the electricity industry accepted that people not belonging to the state industries were present in the general assemblies, organizing soup kitchens for down-and-outs and reconnecting, in part, electricity to shelters for the poor. These were the seeds of helping one another break with the ideology of belonging to a firm and the insane egotism peculiar to contemporary capitalism.

Ridicule failed to kill anymore: the wretched attempts by the state to set the population against the strikers failed. After the fiasco of the first demonstration of 'angry passengers held hostage by the strikers', it decided to cancel the following demos. In spite of the generalization of disorder on urban transport, the population were not at all unsympathetic to the strikers, an attitude which stood out clearly from the latent hostility during the preceding SNCF strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986. In general, the sympathy was passive sometimes active: the setting up of a support fund for the strikers, putting up those occupying depots in the centre of Paris and who lived too far away on the outskirts to return every evening to their home, etc.

There were moments when it was possible to think that things were going to go much further. But the initial dynamism foundered, then came to a halt, without the demands, which had caused the strike even being met, in spite of the general bitterness when the strikes were called off and the continuation of certain pockets of resistance.

The repression had been restrained, except in ultra-sensitive sectors to the functioning of capital, like in the electricity industry, where it was directed at isolated pockets of unyielding resistance. The absence of cash, the fear of being without it and of being laid-off, had been some factors which had contributed to the general inertia, in particular in the most structured sectors of capital where self-reliance, the war of one against all and of each against themselves, are, henceforth the rule. But the strikers themselves were less hamstrung by lack of money, at least immediately. Moreover, the determined among them replied to people who proposed to raise money on their behalf: 'we are fed up with striking by proxy. Better to go out on strike yourselves'. The critique of 'striking by delegates' was to the point. It put in relief the somewhat amorphous behaviour of ordinary citizens, accustomed at work to delegate the resolution of their problems to official and officious individuals and therefore, scarcely inclined to show any spirit of initiative. Moreover, on the whole they continued to work, willingly or reluctantly, at best marching behind the trade union leadership, with the unemployed sometimes by their side. Even the mass of strikers were less and less mobilized. They stuck to the simple matter of renewing the strike through the general assemblies, participating in demonstrations and in the parties organized at their workplaces.

Against the prevailing passivity, the most combative strikers called for 'the generalization of the strike'. The formula was ambiguous: it meant they considered their own activity, the strike they had embarked on, as the obligatory reference point for all potential revolts.

The unblocking of the situation could not come from the simple increase in the number of strikes. The extension was, in part, subordinate to radicalization, to bypassing the limited character of the initial initiatives which had stirred the mass of protesters. The contradiction between the breadth of the protest and the near general absence of a subversive perspective was clear to those who had not lost their clarity. In spite of their combativity, the protesters had stumbled over two essential questions, that of the function of work and concomitantly, the role of the state and in particular, the welfare state.

The strikers in the state sector were rejecting the devalorization of their situation. But they had taken on board as unassailable their alleged mission, 'to be at the service of all citizens'. They had valorized what their survival was based on: their work. They endowed it with unique virtues whereas here, as elsewhere, work has become something very functional, with no particular meaning to workers except that it permits them to have money and to be recognized as citizens. Their sole peculiarity is to be an integral part of the state's communication system.

Furthermore, the state workers who had been able to profit from the weakness of the latest technology in their workplaces had not understood the modifications these had already led to in the rest of society. They were hoping their strike would paralyse the economy in its entirety and would therefore force the State to give in over the essentials. Nothing of the sort happened.

In the Paris region, the transport blockade had been total, much more so than in the winter of 1986, but the impact had been less. Industry has practically disappeared to the benefit of finance, the press, etc. There the computerization of work processes predominate. Firms have been capable, much more so than previously, of carrying out their essential activities thanks to flexible time and the use of home based computer terminals. Some managers had hesitated to put similar measures into operation because they were in doubt about the enthusiasm of their personnel and preferred to have them under their watchful eye in order to control them. Moreover, the nature of work did not always permit it, in particular in the retail trade. But the tone was set.

The concept of a communication network less and less overlaps that of the transport network. To increase the pressure, it would have been necessary for strikers to block other networks which

was difficult to achieve without the connivance of employees in telecom. The electricity industry, etc. The strike in the electricity industry (EDF) would have had a much greater impact to the degree where the communications network couldn't function without electricity. But the trade union leadership, aware of dangers, broke the few strikes which took place in the electricity industry and warned the over-excited against 'acts which endangered the security of power stations and the grid'.

Behind the fixation on retaining acquired privileges, there appeared ambiguities at the same time towards the welfare state. For example, calls for guaranteed employment, even payment for not being employed.

The system of labour protection, put in place on the morrow of the Liberation, was indispensable to the reconstruction of the basis of the state, and a prelude to the subsequent frenzied accumulation of capital over the next 30 glorious years. Labour power was then considered as the most precious capital. The recent changes within capital, in particular technological changes, have brought into question its centrality and as a consequence, the state treats it as a depreciating commodity whose upkeep is expensive and worthy of being thrown in the waste paper basket.

Moreover, the domination of the welfare state was of a piece with the helping-out mentality. It had accustomed citizens to seeing their survival problems taken in hand and decided by a supreme authority in a practically quasi-automatic fashion without there being any need to intervene themselves. This renunciation had been the reverse of protection. In particular, it wasn't for nothing that in the atomization and partial ashenia that stubborn individuals, because of their hatred of work, fled firms in order to try and live a little. Despite the partial questioning of the welfare state, the need for social security wastes and encourages the partial neutralization of energies which, if not, would become dangerous to society.

Neo-liberalism is to be sure inhuman. But it does no more than reveal the internal essence of capital: for it, the human is only of interest to the degree it is capitalizable. From now on, more than ever, it will be too much. When state power becomes the apologist for labour, it is not because it thinks that the employment of all potential workers remains the primordial condition for the value creating process of capital but in order to try to make good, at the least cost, a life of inactivity, the origin of revolts. The state has a horror of emptiness. So to keep order, any kind of activity is better than none at all, such is the credo of neo-liberalism which has taken over from the apologists of the welfare state. Work remains the best cop even though the mode of contemporary capital's functioning renders practically impossible the employment of all available human beings, even on the cheap.

It might appear paradoxical that some protesters who were indifferent to politics should have granted so much importance to the idea of democracy: faced with the authoritarianism of state power, the defence of citizenship appeared to them indispensable.

In France, the myth of the sovereignty of the people has always been of great importance in the minds of the average citizen. They see there the means of disposing of despotisms, although it resurfaces without ceasing from the representation they have themselves chosen. But the myth would never have a similar hold on them if the state had not also appeared as their protector with the setting up of the welfare state. Not only did it assimilate, in the last analysis, citizens with workers, but also as workers it protected them somewhat, they and their families, against the upset and risks inherent to wage workers in the service of capital. In France, the welfare state had thus realized up to the end the democratization of the state.

From now on, the transformation of capital shall make citizenship appear as a pure political form without a socially effective content. That is why the reduction of the protective role of the state is linked to the partial, and even total questioning by the excluded, of the statute of citizenship. Here also, neo-liberalism plays a revelatory

## Aufheben

role. Democracy appears, even under a benign appearance, as what it always had been: the domination of capital.

The winter crises also revealed the paradoxes of contestation for official unionism. The protesters have, *en masse*, expressed willy-nilly, their refusal of neo-liberalism following union officials to the degree that, with the exception of those in the CFDT, they made a show of mobilizing them.

It is, however, notorious that in France disaffection with trade unionism has considerably increased over the years. At the risk of abstraction, the period of radicalization after May '68 had not shown a surpassing of the trade union strait jacket. Rather, it had sanctioned atomization, the dissolution of former combative communities and submission to the imperatives of capitalist restructuring.

But the principal characteristics of the welfare state in France is to have integrated the trade unions, who at times have preserved the facade of contestation, into organs for the protection of labour. 'Paritarisme' (the equal representation of both sides when management and trade union leaders meet) gave the impression to the trade union rank and file, and continues to give it despite de-unionization, of having a direct hold over state management through the intermediary of their leaders.

From their angle, the majority of trade union bosses were apprehensive; the reduction in the contractual function of the state would mean to them the loss of sinecures and positions even if the tendency to participate in the mode of neo-liberal management was pronounced among them and not only in the CFDT. What's more, they knew that their acknowledgement as partners by state power depended on their being representatives and their capacity to enclose and derail trouble in the enterprises, especially in attracting and controlling the most combative individuals which appeared.

Already for a number of years, the day belonged not to exclusion (except in the CFDT) but to recuperation, in order to try to broaden the base of the pyramid whose mummified summit was in danger of falling to pieces. The shop floor delegates' development is henceforth very different from that of preceding generations. The oldest had often participated in radical groupings which had sprung up after May '68, particularly in workshop committees outside of the main trade unions. The bankruptcy of their revolutionary political pretensions had led them to devote the majority of their energy to rank and file trade unionism even when they were sometimes members of Trotskyist/anarchist groups, etc. The youngest have come from the co-ordinations of winter '86. They are pretty indifferent to trade union labels; not uncommonly they belong at one and the same time to several organizations including the libertarian wing of the CNT. Their combativity is at times real. But, as long as they manoeuvre within a framework of a trade unionism approved by the state, they are tolerated by their leaderships as elements necessary to their survival and to the maintenance of their influence over the incredulous who, for want of better, accorded them some credit for trying to limit the damage.

The trade union leadership played the game well. The basis of their subtle sabotage was double language. They had, in part, consigned to the basement their stall-holder slanging matches and sought to consolidate, for the moment at least, the branch on which they were sitting and which they had contributed to sawing through. Hence the demagogic appeals to a 'unitary inter-trade action through the generalization throughout the country of strikes and demonstrations for the scrapping of the Juppé Plan'. In reality they refused to extend the strikes, in particular in the electricity industry (EDF), monopolizing speech and communication in the strikers' assemblies, controlling demonstrations and causing them to degenerate into inoffensive, repetitive marches in which the aim was exhausting their energies and preventing the most radical of them taking over the local branches after their own fashion.

The winter crises confirmed the breakthrough of a renewed rank and file trades unionism recombining itself outside of traditional confederations, very much upsetting the different leaderships, in particular the leadership of the CFDT. From now on the model is the SUD.

The frequent references by the founders of the SUD to the origins of revolutionary syndicalism, indeed of anarcho-syndicalism for those who are also members of the CNT, to the original trade unions and to the first associations which had as their objective the emancipation of the workers, could be deceptive. Likewise their hostility to the most narrow minded corporatism.

But their steps were more the result of the exclusion imposed by the leadership of the CNT than of any critical reflection. In reality, they are participating in the renewal of trades unionism, a renewal based both on taking up the theme of self-management and the taking into account of the phenomenon of exclusion, up to then neglected by the main unions. They combine the traditional defence of the right of state employees with the defence of the workless, the homeless and illegal immigrants, participating in the creation of charitable organizations and multiplying contacts with those religious and lay people who are taking over from the state in matters of social assistance.

The SUD is already an integral part of a combination movement such as the purest democrats of our epoch dream of, champions of 'the defence of civil society against the attacks of state power'. But the renovated combination movement is rotten even before flowering: it is born out of the decomposition of the former



Les services publics,



professional trade unionism, based on the identification of individuals with their type of work, and from the emergence of new reformist associations based on the aim of integrating into the world of work all those who have been excluded, so that they become citizens in their entirety. In spite of the good will of a number of SUD members, this atypical trade unionism, as they like to call it, has nothing revolutionary about it.

The irony is that the bureaucracy of the main unions does not stop them from participating in the institutional mechanisms in the state industries, in particular, in elections which allow them to be recognized by the state as the official representatives of the staff. The notion of not abandoning the terrain of power-sharing institutions, from workers' committees to administrative councils, to the managers is completely worn through. The terrain is full of pitfalls, delegates are admitted as co-managers of labour-power.

Faced with the institutionalization of the SUD, some protesters propose to limit the duration of delegates' participation in the co-management organizations and even to elect and revoke them on the basis of only the decisions taken in general assemblies and strike committees. But no formal procedure has ever impeded the appearance of a hierarchy within the institutions even when the base is regarded as sovereign. As long as individuals express the need to be represented, they are always confronted by the fact that the representation that they have chosen escapes their control.

It is customary in France for demonstrators to try to get round obstacles encountered in concrete struggle through a recourse to abstract recipes. Faced with the incapacity to understand what was shackling the development of the content and the contents of the movements unfolding, there was a return to apologetics regarding well-known forms. But, detached from the context that gave them life and meaning, they were nothing more than dead, hollow formulas, phantoms which no longer arouse fear in the holders of state power and their acolytes in the trade union hierarchy. Because the trade unions, for fear of throwing petrol on the fire, have avoided using the term general strike, some protesters thought they saw in it the miracle solution. But whatever their good intentions, they have only tried to outbid their rivals.

The general strike of May '68 constituted their blue-chip stock *par excellence*. In so doing, they no longer demonstrated any critical spirit. For the mass radical movement which broke out then had already passed the very limited confines of the general strike. It began to question work and many other aspects of daily survival: the family, school, urbanism, etc. Under the control of the unions, the occupations quickly shut themselves away and sometimes turned hostile to anything which wasn't to do with the corporate struggle. So leave the dead in peace. The wheel has turned. The structure of society has undergone an in-depth transformation with the commodity invading the totality of relations plus the near total demolition of working class communities which had, in spite of their corporatism, put up a resistance to capital. It has become impossible in France to identify the modern islets of contemporary capitalism, workers and non-workers, with the former workers of industrial capitalism which then constituted the heart of the economy, with the exception of, partly, state industries and what remains of the classical industrial firms.

To go on strike is not reduced in importance because work, as a feature of the domestication of individuals, remains the basis of society's functioning. But the general disruption of the work process throughout the country is, less than ever, the model for combat for every particular revolt. The ensemble of riots and the straight-jackets which suffocate us overwhelm the confines of work. Henceforth, work disruptions are only one of the moments of the movements of insubordination against state power and contemporary society. Witness the urban riots endemic to the megalopolis of the most advanced countries which already, in spite of the limited character of their objectives, are no less a very characteristic manifestation of revolt in our epoch.

It is impossible to say today what will happen tomorrow. The outcome of the winter movement has not been settled in advance. In relation to those of the recent past it has achieved some advances but, at the same time, it has revealed the existence of enormous obstacles. Of course these are not, *a priori*, insurmountable and must not become the pretext for kow-towing. Nothing is inevitable, and as the celebrated saying recalls: 'the power of the masters also rests on the weakness of the slaves'.

However, it none-the-less remains true that historical conditions have been modified. The Juppé plan is not the only fruit of the neo-liberal fads of the technocrats in delirium who are today in power in France. In this case the mass strikes of winter would have been enough to cause its withdrawal. But behind them looms the menacing shadow of the real enemy whose managers they only are. The enemy is global capitalism which has decided, on a planetary scale, to deliver the *coup de grace* to those it has not yet got under control. It's also the reason why the shrewd Juppé plan has the capacity to take a lot of punishment.

Moreover, the victims of neo-liberalism are in a corner. On the one hand, the oldest are scarcely enthused by the programmes coming from bygone periods which in general were reformist. On the other hand, young people have grown up in the shadow of the crises, in an atmosphere of generalized nihilism, which characterizes contemporary capitalism.

Even when the determination to unravel it is real, the absence of a global perspective for overcoming the survival which envelopes them condemns them to explosions of anger which are considerable but without any follow up at the moment, when even a simple resistance to the encroachment of capital is a very arduous thing to achieve. Capital has always taken back what it granted the night before and one cannot appraise the winter movement in terms of a balance sheet. But the non-satisfaction of basic demands had a part to play in the feeling of powerlessness. We don't live only for the pleasures of the flesh but when they aren't to be had those of the spirit offer no consolation.

The absence of great aims does not prompt the use of great means except in very particular situations. Power understood this. In spite of the fear the massive work stoppages in state industries aroused in them, they relied more on the likelihood of decay than on savage repression and gave way to sectional demands only to accelerate the decomposition.

A handful of irreducibles in Paris and the regions, in order to struggle against defeatism and the return to atomization following the return to work, have taken it upon themselves to think and act in a co-ordinated fashion in expectation of a hypothetical resumption. The initiative is not without interest. But it is essential to comprehend that it cannot be a matter of reconstituting the action committees, such as existed in the period of radicalization inaugurated by May '68. And still less the co-ordinations, in the image of those which arose during the preceding strikes and which sought to be the representatives of different trades and professions in struggle. Without neglecting the exchange of information and the rest, it is, more than ever, necessary to draw up a critique of the movement of insubordination which we participated in. The possibility that individuals refusing to accept resignation will converge depends on it. What is necessary, in particular, is the critique of trades unionism, even atypical trades unionism. It is difficult because it could be the cause of a distancing, not only as regards trade union leaderships, but also as regards friends who are still full of illusions on the question of rank and file trade unionism, and not comprehending the critique, the latter could liken it to a rupture in relations forged during the strike. But it is today one of the conditions enabling us to act by ourselves and for ourselves.

ANDRÉ

## France End of 1995: Anger and Huge Strikes

Governments today are so accustomed to hammering into peoples' heads arguments to do with economic logic (calculability, profitability, competitiveness). Used repeatedly they believe it will enable them to pass no matter what measure. It is true that in Europe since the commencement of the big neo-liberal offensive some ten years ago the movements which arose to oppose it have only rarely been able to prove the contrary. To date, the last which succeeded in France was against the CIP (creation of a minimum wage for those under 25 and obviously inferior to the minimum salary in force). In any event the present French government has starkly shown itself to have a large appetite for economic adjustments: privatizations (which have been a bad experience for a far from negligible part of the population) had, when they touched on the public sector, aroused deep suspicion. And, it was at this point that Prime Minister Juppé had sought to put into effect the plan for restructuring the SNCF which had been on the cards for several years, comprising an undermining of railway workers' social benefits, a reduction of the SNCF's public function and, as an inevitable consequence, lay-offs to come (after tens of thousands over the last few years). At the same time a plan for the reform of social security was put forward with the aim of balancing the budget - that old monster.

It was already practically inevitable and foreseen several months previously that the railway workers were going to go on strike to protest against the 'agreed on plan', that is, the projected restructuring of the SNCF. Any eventual overhaul such as specific retirement provisions had not yet been announced. The railway workers had for some years vigorously denounced the logic of profitability which they were the butt of. The plan would only push things further. The logic of the TGV had profoundly altered the SNCF's financial politics and reduced to a secondary role the notion of public service. This meant firstly a huge indebtedness and hence the technocratic necessity to make the railways pay - therefore railway staff had to be reduced, and fares increased according to market logic. Reservations were to be obligatory and tickets purchased an hour before departing practically like air travel. Bit by bit, the notion that there existed non-profitable lines which had to be axed, no matter what problems this would pose to passengers, began to command attention. When work loads become punishing and are not acknowledged as such the more it becomes the norm. Hence proposals to reduce any advantage linked to this aspect.

In these conditions, where conflict was already virtually inevitable, the announcement, at the same time, of a plan 'levelling down' specific public sector provisions and a plan to redress social security financing, substantially modifying its administration, could only unleash the railway workers' anger. The public sector, whose privileges were also threatened, supported them on a massive scale as relatively did people who found the social security reforms disquieting. All this has unleashed a wave of strikes in the public sector, principally in the transport sector (trains, metro, bus, Paris at a complete standstill) and the post office, virtually paralysing the entire country for three weeks.

It is hardly a matter of indifference that the strike was, in large part, catalysed by the overhaul of the social security system bringing it solely under the control of the state. What people feared, and doubtless with good cause given the European priority of profitability in all areas of the public sector, is that once it became a state concern, nothing could prevent it from making economies in the future - even the prospect of privatization - a reduction in contributions increasing the difficulties of average and below-average wage earners. Besides, it wasn't surprising that a majority of French people had no confidence in a government when it came to reforming social security. Over the last few years adjustments have already taken place which, each time, have entailed a reduction in

entitlements, making life even harder for poor people. In the era of privatization frenzy, increased competitiveness and relocations, social security had become a symbol of something which had escaped the globalization of the economy, something which still vaguely belonged to the public.

Generally this strike wave had revealed more precisely a latent feeling on behalf of a considerable number of the badly paid that, after ten years, they were not going to put up with any more sacrifices in the name of global competition which had not sensibly improved the precarious nature of their survival, and quite the contrary of what had been affirmed in economic circles. What was starkly revealed was a weariness with the politics of profitability at any price practised by both the state, and enterprises. That is the European logic, the logic of budgets, the control of spending which necessarily signifies a reduction in social investments by the state and an increase in insecurity which had begun to be felt as insupportable. The promised compensation of a reduction in unemployment corresponding to a renewed acceleration of the economy increasingly appeared as a mirage wheeled out solely to reassure. People have not yet got around to openly and explicitly criticizing this 'Europe' such as statesmen and bosses conceive it but, being obliged to submit a little more to the yoke of balance sheets and profitability, to seeing the promised jobs going to Asia or South America, a permanent doubt has set in. In order to participate in the development of international markets, it is not necessary to count on the enthusiasms of the crowds. People are only trying to save their hacon.

In this movement of discontent, there is a determination to contest economic logic, refusing the proposed new plans according to this economic logic even though doing so on a defensive terrain, desperately clinging on to previous gains.

Some hundreds of thousand people regularly demonstrated in the streets simply shouting 'down with the overhaul of pensions', 'down with the overhaul of social security', and ending by calling for Juppé's sacking. All this could often be compared with a trade union demo with the usual predictable break-aways. Except that the number of demonstrations in the regions were striking (sometimes around 100,000 in towns with around several hundreds of thousand inhabitants) and that the demonstrations lasted for several weeks without peoples determination, in response to the arrogance of power, weakening - in spite of the loss of a not negligible amount of money. This had been seen to such a marked degree for a very long time, some said, not even since 1968.

The movement has expressed an interesting tendency desiring a real dialogue and a clean sweep of authoritarian decisions and the ever-ready plans of experts which are implemented shamelessly, even violently, and, if the resistance is too powerful, by negotiations which invariably end up agreeing on something, (which seems to be the case now, given that the strike has ebbed and the government has not given a proper guarantee, at least as far as concerns social security reform).

This tendency to take democracy at its face value showed up regularly in the remarks of strikers and people who were interviewed. It even happened one Wednesday evening on December 1st during a live TV broadcast which laid claim to being democratic by letting strikers speak (in fact, the time allocated to them was far less than to the crew of invited experts). The strikers however, detourné and extended democracy. We were able to hear directly the statements of postal workers and striking railway workers in spite of TV contrivances not allowing them to speak for long enough so they could not really develop their ideas. (All the same, they succeeded in making their presence felt sufficiently to be given a little time to talk). We were able to hear a SNCF striker remind us

that if the SNCF was so in debt it was because it had been financed for ten years without adequate funding, the Pharaoh-like TGV project which had been decided on solely by the experts and which now everyone had to pay for and that there was no reason to look elsewhere for the famous SNCF debt. Finally, each group of strikers interviewed managed to get in a direct live appeal to generalize the strike - all this at a peak viewing hour (between 21 and 23.30 hours). The programme's presenter was definitely in for a roasting that night.

It is necessary however to temper the enthusiasm which could inspire a relatively massive strike in Europe at the present time where such movements have a tendency to be uncommon.

Firstly, it was only at SNCF and the Parisian transport network (RATP and the buses) that there was an overwhelming majority for strike action followed by the post and sorting offices (around 100 out of the 130 offices paralysed) - but, less well in the financial department sectors and FOS) (only a few days and not everywhere). In the EDF (French electricity industry) only around 40 per cent came out on strike in the second week of the conflict with cuts occurring regularly in certain regions. In French Telecom it was less. Teachers joined in only after two weeks had elapsed although on a massive scale. In the rest of the public sector the support was considerably less, joining in on the three or four most important demonstrations in large numbers but not subsequently going on strike. The private sector for its part had only marginally been represented. All the same, it is essential to note that in spite of the daily difficulties created by the absence of transport (especially in the Parisian region) many people who continued to go to and from work reserved their smiles and sympathies for the strikers claiming solidarity with their demands even if they didn't see their way forward to the possibility of joining in.

Secondly, the nature of the proposals having led to the strike (social security/public sector pensions and the agreed-on plan for the SNCF), had provided a staging post for the major trade unions who kept control over the movement and its opportunities even if they were sometimes thrust aside and necessarily had to go along with strikers determined to demonstrate their anger. But it had always been at stake that the demanded withdrawal of the proposals would be followed by their subsequent re-negotiation. By whom? The trade union experts naturally. Obviously such control of the movements possibilities had weighed on the ideas, the development of the debate and the furtherance of a critique of society. The trade unions had shifted this onto the political terrain against the government in power nicely aided by Juppé's boasting stance. And this tendency in the movement to express a profound dissatisfaction with the neo-liberal transformation of society and the dismantling even of the idea of public service (because what counts, above all, is profitability imposed by experts whilst, by definition, the notion of public service must come from the public deriving satisfaction according to its will and deliberation) has only been incompletely sketched out and expressed under the form of defensive slogans. Swept along by the groundswell, the unions decided to calm things down by calling for militant demonstrations which passed off to the detriment of reflecting on the reasons for this discontent and to communicating this essential aspect.

It is not by chance that this time there wasn't any autonomous co-ordination leading the movement. On the one hand, concerning the planned restructuring of the SNCF, the CGT, which is still very influential in this sector, had the time to foresee the conflict and prepare to be an active force. Regarding the issue of social security, the FO, which has been partly responsible for its management for several decades, was not going to let such a bastion fall without doing anything. Marc Blondel, its leader, had not ceased to let rip during the conflict in order to obtain what he wanted: a subsequent re-negotiation with the unions and, once he obtained it, he had made haste on one thing only: that the strikes end. These elements marked the weakness, the movement's lack of an independent spirit which, in spite of its determination and pugnacity, let its possibilities be pretty well smothered by the trade unions.

The force of the movement has, at times, been compared with May '68. In fact the relationship with '68 is far from being a direct one and the size and of the demonstrations, at least in the regions, could only make one think so sometimes.

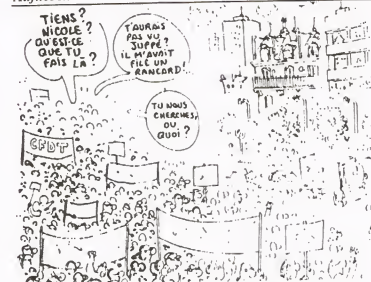
There has been a change of mentality. Insecurity has grown since then. People defend themselves more than they go on the attack and, although their determination is great, they increasingly feel they have their backs to the wall. Perhaps it is still a matter of changing the social system but it does not directly express itself as such. What hasn't changed much are the methods used by governments and trade unions to limit conflicts in a way that enables them to be resolved without changing anything essential in life. In 1968 people gave free reign to their enthusiasm for destabilizing a far too peaceful France, staid governments, the daily grind. The question of social activity was posed in its essence: attack on hierarchies, the questioning of work itself as alienation ('never work'). Peace finally had been bought through a hefty wage rise. But society had burnt with an intense flame.

The atmosphere today is far from being so inflammatory, the imagination is not always there at the appointed time, spirits are flagging, people have retreated generally, 'globalization' strides implacably onwards. They fear for their children and aren't stride out (especially in the private sector literally knocked sideways by layoffs and insecurity), they are ready to protest that they want no more aggravation and seek to pose the social question in terms of guaranteed employment. Unfortunately, it is not just a trade union slogan. 'Employment' has become a national obsession in France and that, of course, prevents any fundamental questioning of government means (whether right or left, they fundamentally obey the logic of profitability and global competition) and the aims and means of firms. How far away it seems from the popular need to seize real power in society and, starting right from wherever it may be, to assemble and decide on what to do and what sort of activity. There is a tendency to want more than simply holding on to past gains but it remains powerless, paralysed by the apparent immensity of its task: the questioning of global logic.

The strike has become serious, responsible. It lacks a dose of madness in order to think beyond social security, retirement and the future of the railways.

One thing is certain, the apparently unstopable managerial dialogue finished up, on account of reducing the mass of wage earners to a precarious existence, by colliding headlong with determined resistance. The entire logic of the economic arguments seeking to justify austerity plans could not prevent people from feeling that the only thing that made their lot supportable, if not enviable - that is a minimum of security - was being blown sky high by global competition. For now, this is expressed only by the defence of past gains, in the need for a return to security (wages, pensions, social security, state support) and trade union experts are well placed to channel these ideas springing from dissatisfaction. It is the social wrapping indispensable to survival in a world that is fundamentally competitive and individualistic. Bit by bit, this social wrapping is eroding, the forward march of Europe wants it thus because it fits perfectly with the world movement of markets and economic liberalization. There is therefore a good chance that one will often see the return of such movements against insecurity elsewhere in Europe. The problem that is posed is knowing how these movements can break free from ideas limited to the defence of a security that is not exactly exciting and enviable. The leaden weight of the trade unions is still capable of limiting the debate, but beyond this problem it is in the hands of each and everyone that the limitation of ideas thrives. Between the mostly aimless and violent outbursts in French suburbs and the fatalism dominating society as regards the advance of commodity logic, there is not today an influential pole of opposition that has succeeded in establishing itself. Over the last few years there have certainly been new things like the homeless movement, those of the excluded and unemployed which have freely denounced and forced state bureaucracy to insist that immediate





concrete solutions be found for people in a state of pressing need, deprived of all material support and slipping into vagrancy. By occupying government buildings, in forcing open in a real sense the doors of ministries, they have ensured that some attention and comfort are accorded to them. But, up to now, their aim, the satisfaction of urgent needs, has become more or less mingled with that of survival. Their appeals for solidarity, if completely justifiable, have been too tainted with humanism, even by Christian good will (Abbot Pierre for example), to dare to attack the social logic at the very root of the problem which leads to these sinister consequences. Increasingly people are to be seen without a roof over their heads, wandering aimlessly about, totally discarded. One extremely disabling thing in France (and, no doubt, more generally in Europe) is that there does not seem to be any alternative for society other than, on the one hand, an ultra-liberal destructive privatization which doesn't give a hoot for those countless people who don't figure in the statistics, and on the other, an appeal to state protection under the sign of extended provision. It's as if society had lost all ability to organize itself, to generate its own values, its own richness and material, other than participation in the market (whether European or the world). In any case, the least one can say today is that this blocking of a social alternative has two poles: the affirmation of ultra-liberalism and the defence of the welfare state manifests in every way the same acceptance of the everlastingness of the system, stopped from casting any real doubts, beyond a simple pin prick, on the fatal march of 'progress'. And yet I will not be the last to draw whatever benefits I can from the state. These exist so autonomously from society, from the will of the people - a monstrous bureaucracy - that the sanest relationship one can still have with it is not to hesitate to profit, where possible, from its ungainliness and blindness. To demand a just return, whether in maintaining the gains of wage earners or, from the recruitment of new aides, or to profit from the bureaucratic shortcomings of the system is one thing. But it definitely does not constitute a point of departure for a reversal of perspective in social life. Far from it.

It was pleasurable obviously to see economic activity reduced to a crawl for several weeks and feel that its smooth functioning corresponded to a form of slavery, to a general stupefaction. To a certain extent, the massive mobilization in the streets restored confidence because one could see it was possible to resist, to refuse new austerity measures and to effectively oppose the authoritarian decisions of experts. The expression of a mass of people, of the average French person, that is a poor person, confirmed the possibility of a return to pressure in the streets which the movement against the CIP in the spring of '94 had already signified clearly. When it came to a return to work people dragged their feet. With sectors continuing to remain on strike, one saw that the outcome of the conflict, pensions and unwritten guarantees, satisfied no one. Defiance persists and the atmosphere is one of readiness in the event of negotiations fouling up. One last point in

favour of this type of strike movement in our times is the extreme fragility of the economy confronted with a transport stoppage. After a few weeks of strikes the whole system grinds to a halt. All firms lose money on a vast scale and are economically asphyxiated. It is more than ever a solid basis on which to make a practical critique, the problems remaining being those of clarity of critique and effective solidarity with strikers who still rely a lot on trade union organization.

On the last point it doesn't to amount much to unreservedly enthuse about the force of the movement when one sees how the beginning of a vital public debate, experienced as such, was so easily eaten away, often disarmed by slogans and ready-made ideas.

Reflection has not managed to effectively break the vicious circle of obsession with employment and purchasing power, the imagination of people always seeming to stumble over the vision of social struggle. Finally, the impression is of a movement which attacks the real enemy, the absolutism of money, without finding its true voice to speak about a general situation and which remains clouded by a still corporatist language. The protest has not fulfilled its promise, thus leaving the field open to trade union experts and government specialists skilled at a 'realistic' negotiation concerning benefits and who won't risk changing anything making up life's mediocrity and misery.

#### Provisional end to the state of things.

1. The particular system in place at the SNCF forces on-track workers into retirement at 50 and others at 55, while elsewhere the retiring age for some years had been at least 60 following a lengthening of contributions imposed on the private sector under the pretext of course of competition and profitability to 40 years in place of 37.5.
2. It is necessary to clarify some features of the French social security system. Up to now the system has been directed at once by the state and by the unions, FO essentially, with in second place, representatives of management. The state had, to be sure, determined the general orientation, the overall budget, the rules concerning the repayment of debt and regulated the structure in general but which was financed by wage earners on the one hand and firms on the other. And, in fact at the level of the regional funds, the trade union FO, so steadfastly opposed to reform, had power over budget decisions and was free to make important appointments. It is necessary to establish whether or not the system is still very indebted, many people including economic experts suspecting and even accusing the state of having taken certain important moneys out of the social security account, which they should have taken from other sources. Thus the state now had no bother pointing to the debt which it could largely have contributed to and created by abusing its decision making powers. Through the reform, social security would be fiscalized, that is financed entirely from taxes and therefore would fall wholly and exclusively under the control of the state, requiring an annual parliamentary debate before making major decisions, particularly budgetary ones (obligatory democracy). In fact the masters have to change which might appear of little consequence. In fact it is nothing of the sort because the trade union representatives who participated in its management actually immobilized the system for years and therefore kept its evolution in check (i.e. submitting completely to criteria of profitability) without having the foggiest idea how to improve it. And in any case, all governments not daring to confront the inevitable discontent were, up to now, afraid to countenance a general reform that solely privileged the profitability of the system and the sums involved. Rocard, the leftist minister, had prepared the movement, Juppé had jumped into the driving seat.

FO: *Force Ouvrière*. A trade union traditionally little to the fore of militant workers' struggles with a strong presence in corporate

branches like prison officers, social security but barely represented in the SNCF, or the sorting offices.

CGT: *Confédération Générale du Travail*. The union traditionally linked to the Communist Party but over the last ten years more concerned with purely trade union matters than political ones following the gradual weakening of the French Communist Party. It

has a tradition of participating in militant workers' struggles which it has made its business to control somewhat. It is still relatively influential in statist sectors like the SNCF and the metro, but generally it is weakening and for some ten years it has gone from a predominant position in industry to the position of a simple constituent - hardly more important than others in a parcellized French trade unionism.

## On the Eve of Battle

In spite of the hopes it raised, the strike movement that began to develop from the end of November to mid-December 1995 hadn't anything revolutionary to it. The announcement of a new round of negotiations and possible conflict between the unions and government after Chirac's election to the head of the French state had anticipated the defensive stance, on the part of the workers, against the agreement over measures dictated by the World Bank, the IMF and their flunkies in a technocratic Europe.

No one was deceived: the key word of the strikers was 'liars' as regards Juppé and cohorts. These people have scarcely the demeanour and talent to allow the poor to dream whilst continuing to enfeeble them. Mitterand is dead and his style has followed him. Chirac got himself elected on promises which lasted less than the illusions.

Right from the moment a government assumed power co-opted by the preceding one<sup>6</sup> and international finance, the official French Mafia had decided that its financial protectors had to be first served. One recognized the master from a slave by their priorities.

The reform of the social security system, the Juppé plan, had followed the raising of taxes. Under the pretext of an imbalance in the accounts, made up and unverifiable, the technocrats had drawn out of their briefcases a bag of measures destined, on the one hand, to reduce to the lowest denominator the growing level of retirement pensions (alignment of the so called public sector with the private) and, on the other, to tax poverty (the means testing of the family allowance, RDS<sup>7</sup> etc.).

Under the domination of the economy the majority of individuals have been stripped of the faculty of simple analysis. Not being able to write, people have learned how to add up, and when the bill is wrong, it is reason itself which is brought into question.

'The nobility of the state' (in the words of the sociologist Bourdieu), the estate holders of this democracy in its death throes, has burdened the mass of the population with a state debt whose benefits they alone are in receipt of. They went about cashing in on their situation with the same ruthlessness as a boss exploits his workers. The despicable and arrogant greed of a government casting aside all legitimacy had provoked a movement of waged workers limited to the defence of what exists.

After 20 years of social disintegration which shaped the working class in France, the state which, in the era of Mitterand, had substituted culture for social links,<sup>8</sup> found itself faced with tenacious resistance, in workplaces where a solidarity of conditions is a mode of acknowledgement. The railworkers began: employees belonging to the metro, the electricity industry, telecom and the Post Office joined in the dance. In the regions, municipal employees joined in the mêlée and it was precisely there, far from the capital, that the most intensely lived experience occurred. There, the strikers, their neighbours and people generally acted in solidarity using their time and their proximity to encounter one another, discuss, have a ball, criticizing this world before remaking it for themselves.

In spite of the near total paralysis of all the means of transport, good humour tinged with the perfume of an at times pronounced resignation, had won out over the bitterness exuded by managerial bastards. Such was its consistency, the mood so widespread that if people stood up and refused further humiliations, it was for the good of all, as much as for themselves. Poor people

living on their knees but in search of vengeance and have a jealous regard for those who say no.

At the heart of the different sectors, the hierarchies, abusing themselves to a fault, and rightly disturbed, were under pressure to carry out their next function: to disappear.<sup>9</sup> Except for some aborted attempts to get the trains running, some buses and tubes, cadres and other flunkies did not intervene hoping to benefit from the beneficial financial consequences of a conflict which, in the beginning, did not threaten them.<sup>10</sup> In the Post Office (PTT) as in the electricity industry (EDF-GDF), the matter was treated with less 'managerial politeness'. Parallel sorting offices were opened, defended by security guards to deal with the former, and for the latter, punitive sanctions accompanied by lay-offs and court cases.

Except in Marseilles there wasn't any significant conflict. Going on strike two weeks after the start, the Marseilles train drivers found themselves isolated when other sectors resumed work. The municipal council of Marseilles linked up with the RTM (*Régionale Transporte Marseilles*) to decide, counting on an apparent weakness, to send cops against the workers. It wasn't a good idea because the strikers had gotten until they gained a provisional concession.

The CGT-CFDT-FO-FSU unions called for four big days of local and regional demonstrations which took place at an accelerated tempo of sorts to stop the emergence of other forms of action which could have escaped their control. Whilst reducing the subversive risk of an absence of demands, the planned demonstrations, in spite of everything, were to the good of people who, up to then, had neglected to seek in the occasion a basis on which to begin to do something together.

At the conclusion of demonstrations, notably in Toulouse and Nantes, there was a ritual clash which smashed the harmonic decor and left the terrain open to the enemy.<sup>11</sup> The time gained by the state to desocialize individuals was not made good by an ephemeral barricade of litter bins. On the contrary, the isolated violence brought home how powerless they were to reconquer the territory of encounter, and fed the state's imprisoning bulimia.<sup>12</sup>

Although latent, the tension between unions and strikers, evident during the 1986-87 conflict in the SNCF (the French railways strike) were not apparent and have not yet been revived. The railway strike began on the 22nd of November without prior warning and union approval in the majority of places threatened with closure by the state-SNCF plan.

Feeling the anger mount and not having the initiative, the trade union organizations decided to support the strikers; the unanimity at the base of the strikes was such that the unions could only accompany the movement and seek to contain its development.

The Stalinist old guard had nearly disappeared from the ranks of the CGT to be replaced by 'Bolshevik' militants less aware of bureaucratic manoeuvres or wage arbitration and the necessity of power sharing. The same applied to the militant wing of the CFDT where libertarian currents jostled delightfully. These young bureaucrats are not yet worn down by lying and about turns, nor unmasked by the betrayal inherent in their function: tell me who you associate with and I shall tell you what you are.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, internal trade union conflicts are expressions of factional rivalries sharing the same ambitions. This endemic quarrel is to be seen at the approach of elections to union office but this time

## Aufheben

it was between unions. The sincerity of individuals employed by these organizations is not proof of their honesty but of their blindness. The rottenest practised a similar sort of opportunism culminating in a show of scorn for the non-unionized, who have nothing to gain from the commerce of waged misery: for the traffic in poverty wages there was nothing on offer.

Prior to haggling over the remains of a movement they could not lead, the trade union crew presented a united front. The unity proclaimed from the top was the inevitable result of alliances brought about by lower ranking militants, in the course of daily assemblies, which had the dual function of keeping the strikers under-informed and voting for the continuation of the strike.

The possibility of transforming these open assemblies into forums where the free exchange of views could flower was scarcely more concrete. Happily, uniformity did not reign across their entirety, but geographical differences were cruelly felt. People discussed more (providing material and financial support) on the forecourt of Bayonne station or in Parisian stations, where the perplexing *Vigipirate* plan made access to meeting places difficult.

Pickets and the occupation of SNCF premises often allowed ideas to be expressed which surpassed the assemblyist consensus: the return of the repressed swept aside the omnipresent bureaucratic mantras.

Between the never ending 'never again like before' numerous poems, quotations and scant consolation:

*'We begin to live when we retire,  
We join battle and open fire,  
Juppé - we ain't no whores,  
You'll be fucked by our struggle and cause.'*

Prominently, flanking a roll call of scabs:

*'Annihilate forever everything that can screw  
up your movement'.*

(Depot de Paris Saint-Lazare)

The gradual 'resumption' of work which, at times, was stormy, was not due to trade union ploys as was often the case in the past. Tiredness, exhaustion, lack of money, the announcement that some reforms were to be frozen contributed to ending the strikes. The most pessimistic strikers were unhappy about the fact that the movement was not generalized: They ignored the degree of control attained by the domesticating power of liberalism. Many who wanted to continue were filled with bitterness, rage and nausea when the strikes were called off. They did not wish to break the bonds that had united them with others for three weeks and create division to the possible detriment of friendships formed and the social adventures to come. Everyone agreed on a pause to recover breath and to critically examine the movement.

It is imperative to understand its deficiencies, its qualities and limits because the state will not go back on its decisions.

To reflect is not to yield.

A railway proletarian  
Paris, January 17 1996.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Title of both a leaflet distributed in the movement and an article in the recent French edition of *Echanges et Mouvement*.

<sup>2</sup> Doctrine which justifies predatory relations between individuals.

<sup>3</sup> A very widespread ideology which opposes a literal to a real meaning of democracy.

<sup>4</sup> Sporadic demonstrations happened in neighbourhoods outside of official ones.

<sup>5</sup> This even extends to the timetable itself. The more useful the borrowed indexed timetable, the more expensive it is - a process already in force in the TGV and which it is intended to apply generally.

<sup>6</sup> Normally in French politics there is a formal separation between the election of the Presidency and the previous government and its Prime Minister. For the first time, however, this pretence was dropped, as the whole government had already been chosen by the previous administration (both of them Gaullist, though before Chirac, Mitterrand, a 'Socialist', had been nominally Head of State).

<sup>7</sup> Increased national insurance contributions of 3.5 per cent.

<sup>8</sup> For example, nationally organized state-subsidized free music festivals, usually several days long and mostly held in the streets in every town throughout France.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to the fact that these cadres, unlike in '86-7 when they fully participated in the repression and scabbing of the railworkers' strike, were themselves threatened with redundancy by the latest State reforms.

<sup>10</sup> It's of no importance to us to have found out that some cadres, or even high functionaries, participated in the demos and the strikes! How far does this go, this team spirit of which these managers speak, these high level scabs who break most movements and then change their tune when it's their axe that's threatened.

<sup>11</sup> A largely marginal pro-situ/autonomist milieu tend, in France, to go on demos in order to wait for the end when they have a traditional stone-throwing, window-smashing, conflict with the cops, maybe overthrowing a car or two. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this, but it has no strategy behind it and doesn't arise out of the rest of the demo; the vast majority of demonstrators aren't touched by it. It's largely a voluntaristic affair which doesn't develop from the concerns and anger of the vast majority, who remain, and are treated as, spectators of this predictable reflex punch up, it doesn't subvert marginality, but tends to reinforce it. The media and the State exaggerate these conflicts in order to be that much more repressive with those arrested.

<sup>12</sup> A reference to the fact that French prisons are being stuffed to bursting point.

<sup>13</sup> These people spend half their time in the CGT and the CFDT offices.

<sup>14</sup> According to the latest news, SNCF management have increased the amount payable to striking union delegates. It has always deliberately confused bureaucratic dialogue with social dialogue. Union delegates have for ages only represented a handful of wage workers.

<sup>15</sup> The plan drawn up under the pretext of combating Islamic terrorism resulted in a vast increase in CCTV cameras, the presence of the army and *gendarmes* everywhere and secret access codes on gates to places where assemblies had been held in the '86-7 strike.





# Escape from the 'Law of Value'?

In *Aufheben* 3 (Summer 1994), we reviewed *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-92*, a collection of articles from the American autonomist journals *Zerowork* (1974-9) and *Midnight Notes* (1979-). We welcomed the book and the tradition which it expresses; in asserting the primacy of the class struggle, the Midnight Notes collective present a vital alternative to objectivist Leninist theories of imperialism in understanding such events as the Gulf War. However, we were ultimately critical of the book, arguing for example that it appeared to grasp the dynamic of modern capitalism simply in terms of the power of capital to (deliberately) manipulate prices to attack the working class. Below, we publish a reply to our review, from one of the editors of *Midnight Oil*. And below that we have our counter-reply, in which we argue that the position(s) developed in *Midnight Oil*, and re-affirmed in the editor's reply, fail to take sufficient account of the mediations that constitute capital's operation through the 'law of value'.

## A reply to *Aufheben's* review of *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-92* by George Caffentzis

*Aufheben*, v.a. irr. lift (up), pick up; keep, preserve;  
(laws) repeal, abolish; (agreements) rescind, annul;  
(philosophy) overcoming, preservation.

These remarks are personal responses to a review of a book entitled *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* which appeared in an English-language journal entitled *Aufheben* in 1994. I am responding to the *Aufheben* review because I am one of the editors of *Midnight Oil* and because the review was lengthy and very critical. Its thesis is this: 'It is not merely that we find *Midnight Oil* is inconsistent, as is only to be expected from a collective project developing over 20 years, rather it is that we find its underlying theory incoherent.' I will argue that the 'underlying theory' is not incoherent and that the arguments the *Aufheben* reviewer uses to prove *Midnight Oil's* theory incoherent are not sound because the views attributed to the Midnight Notes collective are simply not its views. In other words, the *Aufheben* reviewer has read *Midnight Oil* wrong-headedly.

Who is to blame for this misreading, if that is what it is, the authors or the readers or both? Here let me take on a bit of *mea culpa* for the Midnight Notes editorial collective. The text of *Midnight Oil* is a strange and complex animal. The first part deals directly with the Gulf War and with aspects of the petroleum extraction and refining industry internationally during the 1980s. Its purpose was to describe and explain why the war (with or without quotation marks) happened as it did. Parts two and three include articles from *Zerowork I* (1975) and issues of *Midnight Notes* from 1979 to 1990 whose purpose is to trace the development both of that period's class relations in general and of the theory the Midnight Notes collective uses to explain the Gulf War. But the development implies contradiction and some later articles (especially 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse') were clearly in a polemic with earlier ones (especially 'Notes on the International Crisis'). All this happens without much stage direction for the reader. The only place where there is some reflection on the whole project is in the Introduction and there the accent is on the continuity and coherence of the book's articles, although the difference between *Zerowork* and the Midnight Notes collectives is noted.

Thus the reader who notices a contradiction between articles in *Midnight Oil* has some work to do for him/herself. The reader has to ask and answer the questions: 'Is the contradiction a

sign of theoretical incoherence or of theoretical development? Is it a sign of a plain confusion or of an *aufheben* (i.e., a repealing and a preserving)?' Is this too much to ask of a reader? Not necessarily, if the reader is a member of a collective that calls itself 'Aufheben' (even ironically). I will show that at a number of points the *Aufheben* reader-reviewer did not ask him/herself these questions and simply assumed the worst, for reasons that are not clear to me.

The clearest example of this failure has to do with the notion of value. In the *Aufheben* review's section on 'Value and the Apocalypse', the reviewers note that there is a rather obvious contradiction between 'Notes on the International Crisis' and 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse'. The second article clearly rejects the first article's view that capitalism has entered into a period of 'labourless production liberating capital from labour as a value-producing activity'. The reviewer did not note that the first article appeared in *Zerowork I* in 1975 and the second in *Midnight Notes #3* in 1980. In fact, he/she assumes a continuity of views even when there is an explicit rejection of such continuity in the later article, which the reviewer notes! But she/he continues to claim that the 'underlying theory' of Midnight Notes abandons the 'law of value' when in *Midnight Oil* article after article, from beginning (p. xiv: 'Despite all its high-tech machines, space shuttles, laser beam weapons and genetic engineering, capital still depends upon human work') to end (p. 326: 'How can we understand anything about this world without using the axioms of Marx's theory of work, money and profit?') the application of this law forms the basis of explanation.

Our interest, has not been in swearing allegiance to 'the Law' but to show how capital is even more constrained by it at the end of the twentieth century than it was in the nineteenth. The most important consequence of this constraint is that any increase in the capitalization of the highly mechanized industries (such as the nuclear power industry and the petroleum extraction and refining industry) must be accompanied by a major increase in unmechanized, 'wretch' and 'housework' labour. That is why computerization and robotization must be accompanied by a major increase in sweatshops and slavery, i.e., the expansion of areas of absolute surplus value and unwaged labour. This theme has been repeated so often in Midnight Notes writing that it is hard to believe that any reader can mistake it, even if he/she disagreed with it, as the *Aufheben* reviewers certainly do.

The reviewer also argues (a bit incoherently) that Midnight Notes collective uses the law of value incorrectly, since the petroleum industry is not a high organic composition industry and that the proper analysis of oil price is through seeing it as a product of rent. This is not the place to deal with the matter of organic composition at length but a glance at page 237 of *Midnight Oil* will



show that the derivation of the three sectors of industry organized by the ratio of invested capital to wages was empirically based. Anyway, if the collective was empirically wrong, then the *Aufheben* reviewer should show us some numbers. As for the rent analysis of the oil price, it is not that Midnight Notes did not consider it, but it was rejected as a minor aspect of the story. The idea that a few oil sheikhs' and autocrats' 'property rights' determined such a vital commodity's price was hard to believe in the context of the increasing marginalization of rental income with the development of capital in the twentieth century. This is especially the case with former colonial nations which are being recolonized in new ways at this very moment. As I wrote in 'Rambo on the Barbary Shore': 'For the US state considers itself the custodian for world capital of the planet's energy resources, whether these residues of geologic evolution happen to be immediately below US territory or not... "Libyan terrorism" is simply the belief that the petroleum resources locked in the Libyans' soil is theirs. Such presumption is intolerable, according to the present capitalist order' (pp. 292, 294). One might agree or disagree with these expressions, but they hardly constitute neglect of the question of rent.

Disagreement is one thing, but the inability to read what one is disagreeing with is another. Therefore, it is not surprising that some other elements of 'incoherence' in *Midnight Oil* the *Aufheben* reviewer claims to see are also cases of *her/his* disagreement with the Midnight Notes position presented as Midnight Notes' own confusion (*N.B.*: don't mangle aufhebens, please). Let me take them in order: (1) the importance of energy commodities in the present period of capitalist accumulation, (2) the way in which capitalists plan, strategize, and conspire, (3) Midnight Notes' predictions concerning the Gulf War made in October of 1990, (4) the role of class struggle as the major variable in historical analysis.

Is it true, as the *Aufheben* reviewer contends, that 'Midnight Notes contends, that the history of post-war capitalism is the history of oil price changes?' (my italics). No, it is not, as a reading of the full title of the book - *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* - and even a superficial reading of chapter headings and random paragraphs throughout the book would indicate. 'Work', 'energy' and 'war' are clearly as important as 'oil' in the book's conceptual economy, while its *dramatis personae* include not only roughnecks and Exxon executives. Autoworkers, coal miners, nuclear power technicians, housewives and communal farmers are as central to *Midnight Oil's* history of post-war capitalism as are people formerly connected with the oil industry.

Why then does the *Aufheben* reviewer mistakenly claim that Midnight Notes collective 'attempt[s] to reduce the history of capitalism to the history of oil price fluctuations'? My most charitable explanation is as follows. Knowledge of the role of energy commodities and their prices, especially petroleum, play in class relations is crucial for the understanding of the post-war history of capitalism. This is not an insight especially given to Midnight Notes, it is contemporary common sense. This knowledge is especially important in explaining the Gulf War of 1990-91 which was fought, literally, on, over and within oil wells, pipelines, terminals and refineries. Since *Midnight Oil* is a book aiming to explain the main characteristics of the Gulf War through the application of class analysis, oil *qua* commodity and its price had to be the central topic of the book.

Further, the Midnight Notes collective has argued more generally that with the demise of a Keynesian strategy - which focused class struggle in the mass assembly line factories making 'consumer durables' - the centre of gravity of class relations shifted to basic commodities that are essential to both capitalist production and the reproduction of the working class. Energy commodities, especially petroleum, are the most basic of the basic commodities. Consequently, changes in the prices of such commodities penetrate all nodes of the commodity field and are obviously crucial for understanding the history of post-1973 capitalism.

Finally, there is the question of prices. Midnight Notes is not alone in arguing that all the prices of commodities are determined by socio-political struggle. It is the starting point of the critique of political economy both logically and historically. After all, prices of commodities, especially prices of their production, reflect (1) the existence of exploitable labour (hence the continually renewed, violent expropriation of workers from the means of subsistence), (2) the struggle over the value of workers' labour power (indeed, often the establishment of the existence of such value in the first place) in the production of the commodity, (3) the struggle over the surplus value extracted during the production of the commodity (involving battles over length and intensity of the work day), (4) the transferring in or out of the total surplus value generated by the capitalist system as a whole in order to determine the price of production (which

involves the global accumulated struggles of capital and proletariat in all aspects of production).

Though these geological strata of class struggle can be found in the prices of all commodities, they are especially evident in commodities on the top and bottom of the production tree - i.e., in branches where there is a very high or a very low machinery/direct labour ratio. This is so because the global social character of capital is made most evident in these branches. Energy commodities, especially those produced in the nuclear or petrochemical cycle, are on the higher branches, and so their prices reflect the indices of struggle throughout the system.

Taking these aspects of oil prices as essential to *Midnight Oil's* analysis, it would certainly be wrong to say that *Midnight Notes* reduces the history of capitalism to oil price fluctuations, as the *Aufheben* reviewer charges. The most accurate claim one can make is that *Midnight Notes* interprets major changes in oil prices in the 1973-1992 as indices and complex reflections of class struggles throughout the world capitalist system. This too is not such a wild view, the problem is to provide such an interpretation. *Midnight Oil* sketches a narrative that attempts to explain basic inflections in the oil price from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. The particular narrative might be crude and full of gaps, it certainly does not claim to be necessarily true. Other, perhaps better, narratives are possible and I look forward to studying them. But one thing that *Midnight Notes's* approach does is to show how the most dispossessed and apparently wretched people of the planet have changed capitalism and are putting its hegemony in question on the most basic level. The narrative satisfies a minimum condition from my perspective, for any correct understanding of oil price changes or any other important feature of the history of capitalism.

The *Aufheben* reviewer certainly finds fault with particulars of the *Midnight Oil* narrative, but more importantly *she* sees a deeper logical flaw in it: the conflation of 'capitalism with the actions of individual capitalists' for '*Midnight Oil* is fatally undermined by *Midnight Notes's* tendency to ascribe outcomes to the conscious strategy of a unified capital.' In a word, the *Midnight Notes* collective commits a fallacy of composition - by arguing that since individual capitalists have strategies, then capital as a whole has a strategy - which leads it to hold a simplistic and vacuous 'conspiracy theory'.

Here again I argue that the reader has misread the work. First, since the *Aufheben* reviewer recognizes the *Midnight Notes* collective's efforts to read working class action as a determining element in the analysis of any recent historical event or tendency, then surely *Midnight Oil* cannot be ascribing outcomes to the conscious strategy of a unified capital, any more than an outcome can be ascribed to a conscious unified proletarian strategy. So in a war, the victory of side A cannot be ascribed to A's actions and strategy alone, the actions of Side B and its strategy for victory must be included in any account of the victory itself. Since almost every important feature of capitalism is rife with struggles, then any outcome cannot be ascribed to a single strategy. The *Midnight Notes* collective certainly does not believe in the myth of an absolute, omnipotent totality called capital determining values, prices and profits round the planet. That God was never born, it need hardly be killed by *Midnight Notes* or *Aufheben*!

Second, what of the fallacy of the composition retort: 'Capitalism does not have a strategy, although individual capitalists pursue different strategies'? We should remind the *Aufheben* reviewer that not every inference from parts to whole is illegitimate. For example, though 'Each atom in this piece of chalk is indivisible.

Therefore, the chalk is indivisible' is a fallacious argument, 'Every atom in this piece of chalk has mass. Therefore, the piece of chalk has mass' is not. What of capitals and strategies? Let our reviewer attend: there may be a genuine *aufheben* lurking here. For individual capitals and capitalists are not merely mutually repulsive identities, they form a system and a class. Can this system and class, though not conscious, have a strategy? Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Foucault and many others have taught us that strategies need not have self-conscious, Cartesian subjects owning them. Certainly individual capitalists have collective interests (prime among them 'the intensity of exploitation of the sum total of labour by the sum total of capital') and they embody these 'freemason'-like interests in ever more elaborate organizational forms, beginning with mercantile combinations within a city (as noted by Smith) and ending in the most refined international coordinating bodies like the IMF, the World Bank and the W.T.O. (prefigured in the writing of Saint-Simon). But even in the absence of any formal organizational form, one can ascribe a strategy (tacitly, as Locke would say) to capitalists operating collectively. Is this logically improper, fallacious or incoherent? Not necessarily. Is it useful? Perhaps, if it helps in describing, explaining, predicting and retrodicting our history.

The matter of prediction and retrodiction brings us, finally, to the *Midnight Notes* pamphlet, *When Crusaders and Assassins Unite, Let The People Beware*, quickly written in September and October 1990, as an intervention in the anti-war debate in the US which tended to be hysterical and/or apocalyptic at times. The pamphlet tried to soberly describe, explain and predict the outcome of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US/UN response months before the shooting started and stopped. The *Aufheben* reviewer begins and ends the review with this pamphlet and gives the impression that it was a total failure and a proof of the 'incoherence' of *Midnight Oil's* 'underlying theory'. But this assessment is off the mark. Indeed, the following facts - the actual outcome of the war (which led to a *status quo ante* as far as the governments of Iraq and Kuwait are concerned), the elaborate backroom monetary dealings between the Hussein regime and the Bush administration preceding the invasion, the permanent stationing of the US military in the Gulf, the ability of the Iraqi military to remain intact and destroy the southern 'Shiite' and northern 'Kurdish' rebellions, the US government's application of 'marginal [instead of absolute] military force', and the refusal of the US to fight 'a large-scale, conventional shooting war' - were correctly predicted or retrodicted by the pamphlet. Of course, the pamphlet was sketchy and *ad hoc*, but it was the starting point of *Midnight Notes* collective's year-long study of the background of the war which eventually led to the writing of Part I of *Midnight Oil*.

Surely, it shouldn't be surprising that this study would have led to a deepening of our analysis of the Gulf War, especially in allowing us to see its connection to the Debt Crisis and the New Enclosures. Nor should the construction of a more complex analysis of the game played by the major capitalist players among each other, separately, and of the struggle they fought against the oil-producing proletariat, collectively, be surprising either. Somehow the *Aufheben* reviewer wants to blame the *Midnight Notes* collective for studying the issues more thoroughly and putting forth more complex hypotheses on the basis of this study. I really do not understand *their* game in this regard.

Let me end this reply by responding to *Aufheben's* broadest criticism of the book with a brief observation. The reviewers claim that the *Midnight Notes* collective 'overemphasize[s] class struggle' and does not understand the importance of capitalist competition on

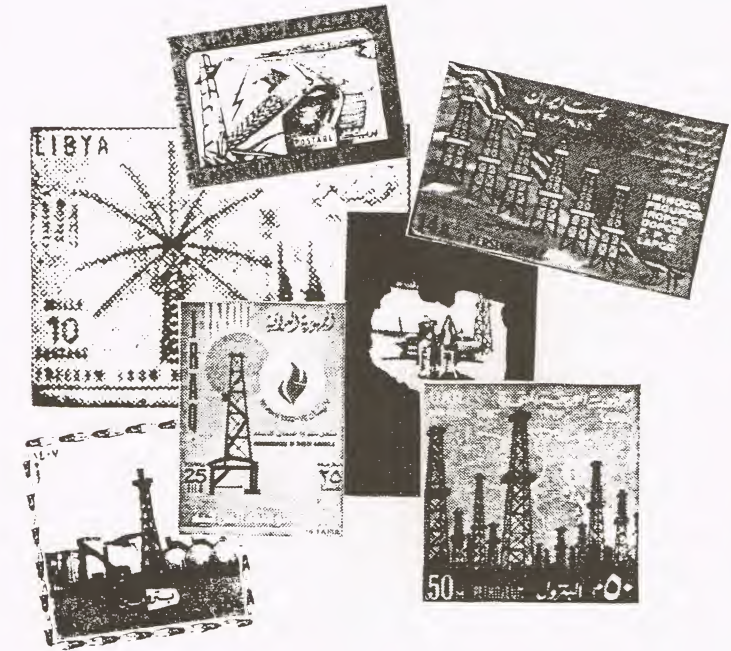


the world market. If Midnight Notes would just tone down that struggle bass and amplify the competition melody, then perhaps they would play more agreeably, the *Aufheben* critic suggests. But this suggestion implies a parallelism between class struggle and capitalist competition, i.e., competition is intra-class antagonism while class struggle is inter- class antagonism. Are competition and class struggle just parts of a larger Hobbesian field of human antagonism? No. Competition operates by the rules of the capitalist game, within a given mathematical framework of risk and probability, and it helps determine the average rate of profit inside the system. Class struggle questions the very rules of the game (and so operates on a meta-level

immediately), its mathematics is one of chance and possibility, and it results in the total surplus value that competition presupposes.

Midnight Notes is interested in action that violates the rules of capital, that opens up new possibilities and that reduces the total surplus value; *that* is the music the collective tries to hear and to play. Do we hear it, all of it, do we play it right? That is our problem. Does competition exist and is it important? Of course. But you don't need to open your window 'round midnight to hear *that* stuff.

Portland, Maine  
December, 1994



## A response to Caffentzis

In his reply, Caffentzis puts forward a seemingly formidable defence against our criticisms, the centrepiece of which is his insistence that in our review we have seriously misread *Midnight Oil*. We believe this warrants a considered response, which we hope will serve both to clarify and to refine our criticisms of *Midnight Oil*. Before responding directly to the points raised by Caffentzis, we should perhaps begin by placing our critical review of *Midnight Oil* in the broader context of how we see our relation to the work of the Midnight Notes and Zerowork collectives.

In devoting space to a lengthy review article of *Midnight Oil* we did not merely seek to highlight a counter-argument to the prevalent Leninist or liberal perspectives on the Gulf War and 'imperialism'; nor did we merely seek to review critically a work that is influential amongst political circles with which we are engaged - although either of these reasons would have perhaps been sufficient in themselves. We did not hesitate to review *Midnight Oil* because we have had a long-standing respect and sympathy for the work of both Zerowork and Midnight Notes over the years. We have all, at one stage or another, been captivated by the audacious leaps of logic which, in drawing together so apparently disparate elements, broke free from the stultifying confines of orthodox Marxism; and we have all been inspired by the assertion of the primacy of class subjectivity and the political centrality of the 'refusal of work'. This is perhaps particularly true of Zerowork, whose path-breaking work in the 1970s seemed to grasp the salient features of the crisis of Keynesianism and the post-war settlements that were just erupting at the time.

Unfortunately times change. In the 1970s, state intervention in the economy had become increasingly frantic in the face of a growing working class militancy across the world. In such circumstances, the notion of two conflicting class strategies, around which the analysis of Zerowork revolved, seemed to have considerable credence. But since then capital has restructured. The 'law of value' has everywhere been reimposed by the increasing international fluidity of capital which has been able to outflank the old bastions of working class power. With the rise of unbridled global finance markets, the power of the nation state to consciously plan and regulate capital has declined.

This change in circumstances has brought with it important political implications for the interpretation of the two strategies theory that had been developed during the proletarian offensive of the 1960s and 70s. On the one hand, with the retreat of the working class throughout much of Europe and America, many autonomists have simply sat round waiting for the materialization (or immaterialization as Negri might have it) of a 'new social subject', or else latched on uncritically to any half-baked liberal or nationalist struggle as a sign of the resurgence of a working class strategy. On the other hand, many erstwhile revolutionaries, in the face of working class retreat, have slipped down the slope to conspiracy theories and concluded that capital is omnipotent and able to impose its strategy almost at will.

In these changed circumstances, the weaknesses of the work of both Zerowork and Midnight Notes have come to the fore. Their audacious leaps of logic now appear all too cavalier. As a consequence, we have felt it necessary to try to move beyond the positions of Zerowork and Midnight Notes, without in the process falling back into the objectivism of orthodox Marxism. To do this it

has been necessary to critically reconsider their work to see what must be preserved, at the same time as retrieving those useful aspects of traditional Marxism, which in their over-exuberance, they have thrown overboard.

This then is our work of 'aufheben', and it is in this light that we approached the review of *Midnight Oil*. Caffentzis, however, argues that we failed to recognize the development and process of 'aufheben' within *Midnight Oil* itself. Caffentzis insists that with the reaffirmation of the 'law of value' the later writings of the Midnight Notes collective stands in opposition to that of the earlier writings of Zerowork which had rejected the continuing validity of this law. Indeed, for Caffentzis, some of these later writings should be read as nothing short of a polemic against the excessive positions first put forward within the pages of Zerowork. For Caffentzis, what we see as incoherence is in fact the contradictory process of 'aufheben' at work in the very pages of *Midnight Oil*, bringing together as it does fifteen years of theoretical development.

However, Caffentzis does admit that the Introduction overemphasizes the continuity of the various articles that make up *Midnight Oil*, and, as a consequence, fails to point out the contradictory process of development that had occurred over these fifteen odd years in which they were written. We would say this is a serious omission, particularly for readers who can only be unaware of the internal debates within the Midnight Notes and Zerowork collectives which presumably occurred more than a decade ago. However, we would be the first to concede that such an omission is perhaps understandable given the political imperative to present a distinct and unified intervention in the debates surrounding the Gulf War and its aftermath.

Also, in his reply, Caffentzis clarifies certain important points. Not only does he underline the reaffirmation of Marx's theory of value in his own and the contemporary writings of the Midnight Notes collective, he also makes clear his understanding of the concept of strategy. As he states:

*For individual capitals and capitalists are not mutually repulsive entities, they form a system and a class. Can this system and class, though not conscious have a strategy? Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Foucault and many others have taught us that strategies need not have self-conscious, Cartesian subjects owning them.*

So it would seem, for Caffentzis, capital does not have a conscious strategy as such. The 'strategy' of capital as a whole emerges out of the conflicting and competing strategies of individual capitals and their agencies such that, with hindsight, it appears as if it possessed a conscious strategy. With all this we can only concur. It would seem that we have indeed misread *Midnight Oil* - or that we have at least been guilty of interpreting it in the worst possible light.

But have we misread *Midnight Oil*? If we look at *Midnight Oil* again we find that nowhere is this crucial notion of strategy made clear, not even as an aside. Throughout *Midnight Oil*, whether in the earlier or later articles, the 'as if' is elided. Indeed, in all the historical narratives that we find in *Midnight Oil*, capital appears as a predetermined totality possessing a conscious strategy whose only limit and problem is the counter-strategy of the working class. Even the most assiduous reader would find it hard put to discover

Caffentzis's sophisticated notion of strategy in the pages of *Midnight Oil*, let alone discern a change in position on this point between its earlier and later articles.

So what of Caffentzis's reaffirmation of Marx's theory of value? Clearly there is a major change of position between the later writings of *Midnight Notes* and the earlier writings of the Zerowork collective. We would be the first to admit that *Midnight Notes* and Caffentzis make important points regarding the continuing importance of Marx's labour theory of value but we still think their account is ultimately inadequate. We shall argue that Caffentzis and *Midnight Notes* fail to really break from the earlier writings of Zerowork on this question and this is why they are unable to clarify the notion of two strategies in their historical narratives. This perhaps becomes clear once we consider Caffentzis's treatment of the question of rent.

The problem of rent was central in the development of Marx's theory of value, and would seem to be of vital importance for anyone concerned with the formation of the price of a natural resource such as oil.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we noted in our review, *Midnight Oil* ignores the whole question of rent in their account of the determination of oil prices.<sup>2</sup>

In his reply Caffentzis simply dismisses the relevance of rent theory on what seems to be two grounds. First he asserts that, in general, rent is no longer significant in the determination and regulation of prices. Of course it can be argued that, with the development of capitalism, more and more of production is subordinated to the capitalist production process and as such capital comes to directly produce more and more of its own inputs. As a consequence, capital is able to escape its dependence on non-produced natural resources and thereby undermine the material basis for the existence of a distinct class of landowners whose ownership of natural resources allow them to pocket surplus-profits as rent.

But this is only an abstract tendency. It in no way means that rent is no longer significant, any more than the tendency for production to be automated means that we have now reached the stage that labour is no longer the measure of value.<sup>3</sup> If nothing else rent still remains vitally important in particular sectors and industries. For example, how can we possibly understand the issue of housing or the capitalist organization of urban space without reference to a theory of rent? And perhaps more pertinently, how are we to explain the pricing of oil in terms of a labour theory of value without reference to a theory of rent!?

This brings us to Caffentzis's second grounds for dismissing the need to consider rent. In the particular case of oil, Caffentzis simply argues that it is absurd to think that the property rights of a few sheikhs can be allowed to interfere in the determination of such a strategic commodity as oil. For Caffentzis, although it may appear that the oil is owned by these sheikhs, or Middle Eastern governments, it is really owned by the USA. But oil is not simply owned, even formally, by a 'few sheikhs'. The oil is owned by governments who not only garner vast revenues from their ownership of oil but also possess some of the most formidable armed forces in the world. What is more, it is from these rights of ownership that some of the most powerful multinationals in the world - the major oil companies - obtain the concessions to produce oil. If the USA really owned the oil in the Middle East, rather than thinking they ought to own it - if all the Middle Eastern oil states were simply puppets of the American government - there would be no need for the US government to worry about Middle Eastern affairs. There would be no need to whip up propaganda about Libyan terrorism nor would

there have been any need, for example, to have bombed Tripoli in 1986!

Of course this is not to say that armed force or sanctions, or the diplomatic threat of force or sanctions, cannot alter property rights or be used to modify the effect of property rights, particularly in relation to such a vital commodity as oil. But the notion that the apparent ownership of oil can be simply dismissed as an illusion, that such property rights can simply be dismissed out of hand when capital is founded on the mutual recognition of the rights of property, is typical of the cavalier logic that we find throughout *Midnight Oil* - a point driven home by the fact that Caffentzis seems to feel little obligation to substantiate such assertions.

This then brings us back to the question of value. It would seem that the notion that rent is no longer significant, at least in the case of basic commodities such as oil, might open the way for the conscious manipulation of oil prices which seems so central to much of the historical analysis we find in *Midnight Oil*, without at the same time requiring the complete abandonment of Marx's theory of value.<sup>4</sup> While such a line of argument may be implicit elsewhere in *Midnight Oil*, Caffentzis himself refuses to take this way out. Instead, it would seem, he argues that it is the high organic composition of capital in the energy sector which allows the energy prices, such as that of oil, to escape in some way the 'law of value' and thereby allow its conscious manipulation against the working class.

In 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse', Caffentzis's analysis of the polarization of the organic composition of capital, away from the medium compositions exemplified by the car production towards the high organic composition industries such as nuclear power on the one side and the counter-balancing low composition industries such as fast foods on the other, offers us important insights. This is particularly true with regards to how this has affected how the working class experiences its exploitation. But neither in 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' nor in his reply does Caffentzis adequately explain how the variations in the organic composition of capital allow energy prices to escape the 'law of value'.

In 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' Caffentzis, drawing on Marx's theory of the transformation of values into prices, seems to argue that because prices are necessarily much higher than values in industries with high organic compositions of capital (i.e., the price of commodities produced by these industries are above that warranted by the socially necessary labour-time added in their production) then this means that such industries are in a position to escape the 'law of value' and therefore are open to manipulation. As we pointed in our review, this argument is far from being sufficient. Indeed, in his theory of the transformation of values into prices Marx was seeking to show the very opposite! With his theory of transformation, Marx sought to show how, although prices may deviate from values between industries with varying compositions of capital, such deviations are systematic and therefore are still regulated by the socially necessary labour-time embodied in their production.

Significantly, neither in 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' nor in his reply does Caffentzis explain the basis for standing Marx's theory of the transformation of values into prices on its head in this way. As a consequence, it would seem that Caffentzis fails to show how certain prices - such as energy prices - can escape the 'law of value'.



But, as we now know from his reply, Caffentzis doesn't after all see capital as a 'Cartesian subject' with a *conscious* strategy. Since for Marx the 'law of value' was the primary means through which capital constituted itself as a totality 'behind the backs' of the conscious intentions of individual capitalists, then perhaps Caffentzis doesn't need to 'escape' from the 'law of value'. But if this is so, how does this square with *Midnight Oil's* 'two strategies' theory? And perhaps more importantly, how does it relate to the historical narratives in which various agents of social capital seem able to manipulate the prices of oil, food and exchange rate more or less at will? The answer would seem clear: it doesn't!

The fundamental problem that unites all the analysis that we find in *Midnight Oil* is that it fails to grasp the mediations through which capital as a totality must continually constitute itself. Caffentzis may seek ultimate refuge in the plea that he and *Midnight Oil* simply seek to emphasize class struggle which, when all is said and done, is the basis of all such categories as value, capital and prices. But, as he should know, *essence must appear*. It is necessary to see how and why class struggle becomes both reified and manifest in such categories as value, price and capital: that is, how capital as a totality constitutes itself out of its apparently disparate parts; and obversely how the working class comes to constitute itself against capital. And we have to make clear how such mediations and processes come to be circumscribed and modified in particular historical conditions and circumstances.

In the absence of any serious analysis of such mediations the reader has no option but to invoke capital as a 'Cartesian subject' with a conscious strategy, or else arbitrarily nominate various agents of the capital in the form of the US government, the UN, the IMF etc.

In failing to seriously consider these questions of mediation, Caffentzis fails to overcome the fundamental problem of the analysis that is developed throughout *Midnight Oil*. As a consequence, his supposed process of 'aufheben' at work in *Midnight Oil* between the early and late writings turns out to be little more than a rectification which produces more problems than it solves. In failing to seriously consider the question of mediations the analysis in *Midnight Oil* fails to stick together, it fails to cohere - it is incoherent.

Caffentzis concludes that ultimately it is all a matter of emphasis: while we want to turn up the melody of competition, he wants to turn up the volume of the bass of class struggle that breaks all the rules. We would conclude with a slight variation on his metaphor: however much you turn up the volume you can't hear the rhythm of the drummer without his drum.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps significantly, it was through the very development of his theory of rent that Marx came to show how 'labour-values' determine production prices, and hence market prices.

<sup>2</sup> Caffentzis claims in his reply that *Midnight Oil* does consider the question of rent in *Midnight Oil*. But to support this claim all he does is refer us to a couple of sentences buried deep in the article about the US bombing of Libya. Such a sketchy treatment of the theory of rent merely reflects *Midnight Oil's* position that the question of rent has little relevance in the determination of oil prices.

<sup>3</sup> Having broken from the second claim, Caffentzis has not broken from the first!

<sup>4</sup> If rent no longer applies then price of oil is no longer regulated by its value (the socially necessary labour required for its production). In terms of value, it becomes indeterminate, allowing a 'degree of freedom' for political intervention in pricing.



*'I've been struggling all my life to get beyond the choice of living on my knees or dying on my feet. It's time we lived on our feet.'*

## Review:

**Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr**  
Pelegian Press, BCM Signpost, London WC1N 3XX



This book tells the story of the development of James Carr from an apolitical gang member, to a black nationalist associated with the Black Panther Party, and finally to a Korsch/Lukacs/Situationist-influenced position critical of the vanguardism of the Panthers. The book was first published in 1975. This new edition comes with an useful Afterword, written by BM Blob and News from Everywhere. Carr died young, and most of the book is taken up with the gang life and particularly the prison experiences preceding his eventual politicization. The Afterword puts his life in context (the then dominance of varieties of New Leftism, conflicts within the Black Panthers, and the crisis in the US prison system in the 1960s). It also points to the important differences between this book and other autobiographies of politicized prisoners: 'it avoids portraying the prisoner as a passive victim of social injustice - and also refuses the martyr role that liberals and leftists try to impose on convicts for their own fantasies and careers' (p. 200).

James Carr survived prison through strength, intelligence and ruthlessness, qualities which he applied not just to the screws and governors but also to his fellow inmates. Like other cons, Carr was involved in a war of all-against-all on two levels: first the interpersonal competition and bullying, and second the 'race' war between blacks, whites and Mexicans. In the book, graphic examples of inter-ethnic violence among prisoners illustrate how this relationship of divide-and-rule served the prison system. But the significance of Carr's experience and perspective is that he was in some of the biggest and most violent Californian prisons in the mid 1960s when a more politicized and united movement of prisoners began to develop. The movement emerged through a turn to black nationalism, which, Carr suggests, at least offered the possibility of enabling cons to see their connections with others in struggles outside the prison. The nationalist movement later developed into a movement against the prison structure itself, and attracted all the ethnic groups.

Carr has some acute comments to make on the limits of the movement. Though the conscious anti-racism was a great advance, the form of the movement remained guerrilla. In a memorable phrase, Carr says that '[g]uerrilla ideology reduces all revolutionary questions to quantitative problems of military force' (p. 169). The disastrous effects of this reduction included the death of his friend and influential militant activist George Jackson, as well as increasingly violent attacks by the authorities on organized prisoner revolts: a 'fight to the finish' was what the reactionary prison authorities wanted, says Carr.

The repressive response of the authorities to the movement only confirmed the opposition between the prison system and the cons as a whole. But Carr argues that 'even when the cons realized that they were all opposed to the system, they were prevented from locating themselves realistically within it: rather than recognize that they were on the margins of society and study strategically the development of society as a whole, they saw themselves as a class apart from the proletariat, or as its vanguard, and adopted an

ideology of class war by which the only battleground was the prison itself. They mistook the system's arm for its heart' (pp. 168-9).

In this ideology, because modern capitalism relies on coercion, then its coercive institutions are its essence or highest expression. It is true that, along with torture and the death penalty in many places, prison is typically the capitalist state's 'ultimate' sanction. But Carr is surely correct in suggesting that the prison is not a representative microcosm of modern class society. In fact, the reverse would seem to be the case: the prison is more an echo of feudalism, with its irrational petty rules, its separation of amount of work undertaken from means of subsistence, its social immobility, and its entrenched sets of interests in the form of the prison guards' organizations.

Carr also links this vanguardism with what he sees as leftism's romantic fetishization of crime. During the time of the political movement among prisoners, those on the outside promoted figures like George Jackson into rebel heroes; but, as Carr says, they were always tragic figures because their value to the movement was as martyrs. Leftists and anarchists rightly point out that there is a relation between capital and criminality; but the problem is how to grasp this relation without seeing the con, on the one hand, as necessarily a rebel hero or, on the other, as necessarily an anti-social element. Carr's analysis of what he calls the criminal mentality ('born to lose') shows how criminality in the form of robberies etc. is based on an antipathy to capital without necessarily being revolutionary. We steal because we don't want to work, says Carr - we want to have control over our lives. But if we have to keep on pulling bigger and bigger robberies to live and meet our developing needs, then we just perpetuate ourselves as robbers and ultimately as cons. As robbers and particularly as cons we might go beyond ourselves, as Carr and others did; by co-ordinating with others to resist the state, we fight capital rather than exist within its interstices. The experience of prison - the other side of the coin of the liberal-democratic ideology of rights and freedoms - has been shown on many occasions to have a politicizing effect on prisoners: cons commonly come to hate and resist the viciousness of the state machine. On the other hand, however, without potential support for such a project, the experience of state power and antagonism easily leads to individual survivalism or even to suicide.

Carr is scathing of prison reform, quoting Marx's argument that basing a revolutionary movement on it is like basing abolitionism on demands for better food for slaves. He criticizes his own actions for merely reacting to the initiative of the enemy - for fighting on their terrain. It is certainly true that all the time that the struggle remains within capital's procedures and concepts it remains a struggle within capital (for more fairness, rights etc.) rather than against it. However, Carr is perhaps being rather harsh on himself since, quoting Marx again, 'Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past' (1934/1852, p.

13)<sup>1</sup> As Carr's own story shows, rather than existing fully formed prior to the struggle, tendencies to push beyond given limits typically emerge from initial demands and conflicts which are more limited. If the present form of the capital relation - the current class composition - is a result of struggle between capital and proletariat, then neither of these forces are always pure; anti-capitalism is mediated by existing capitalism, particularly the latter's progressive tendencies.

More pessimistically, perhaps, just as moderate demands can go beyond themselves in the struggle itself, so militant struggles can feed back into a reassertion of the legitimacy of the prison system on a new basis. Prison history is the history of violent prison struggles and with them various kinds of liberal reforms and reactionary backlashes. Strangeways, 1990, for example, progressed from an initial plan among prisoners for a limited protest, to a practical critique of the prison in the struggle itself (with cons taking over and trashing the building); the riot then fed into a set of liberal reforms (the ending of slopping out); and finally it served as the justification for legislation for harsher punishments for future rebels (the offence of prison mutiny). This is not of course an argument against resistance or demands for better conditions among prisoners,

since any victories by militant prisoners are to be welcomed, and all support (in the form of letters etc.) for individual militants is to be encouraged, particularly if there are links with struggles on the outside.

This book is an autobiography rather than a book of theory, and James Carr led a pretty incredible life by anyone's standards. Of all the incredible things in the book, including the massacres, killings and maimings Carr took part in, it is perhaps his weight-lifting feats that are most hard to believe. The prison lifestyle was often one of privation and drug-taking, yet at one stage Carr apparently trained for five hours a day (exhausting even for today's steroid-fuelled bodybuilders) and bench-pressed 520lb! Not only this, but despite the fact that he was a heavyweight, his waist measurement was only 27 inches.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society. (Originally published 1852.)

## Review:

### *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*

by George McKay

London: Verso



This is a book that has already been dismissed with contempt by many people we know within the movement(s) it describes. Various types of criticisms have been expressed, but what they share overall is a dislike of McKay's 'approach' to his subject matter. In our language, this approach is one of *recuperation* - it is an attempt (not necessarily deliberate) to appropriate antagonistic expressions and render them harmless through transformation and integration into some form of commodity (in this case, academia and the world of coffee-table publishing). Recuperation is a constant danger for anti-capitalist practice. However, we don't think that this book is a particularly powerful example of this, because it is too flawed even within its own terms.

The purpose of the book, according to the author, is to show the historical continuity in such movements as the free festivals, 'new age' travellers, anarcho-punk, rave, anti-roads and anti-Criminal Justice Bill (CJB). The book's publication might be viewed as symptomatic of the growing trend among academics (McKay 'has been' a punk, anarchist and squatter, according to the blurb, but is now a university lecturer) to come to terms with the popularity of direct action, particularly in the cco-movement. McKay's book is within the cultural studies tradition, which allows it to depart from other recent work (typically written from the perspectives of sociology and political science) in an important way: it presents itself as not only an academic work but one from within the movement itself.

From a marketing point of view, this is obviously the best of both worlds. The book appears in the sociology sections of the book shops, but is also displayed prominently in the new books promotions in order to attract those within or sympathetic to the movements (its cover features a well-known

photograph from the Twyford Down anti-road campaign). From our point of view, however, McKay's attempt to commentate simultaneously as both insider and outsider has serious problems. In the first place, surely if anything is of value in an *academic* work, it is its systematicity and scholarship. Cultural studies, however, while breaking down interdisciplinary boundaries, has little of the empirical rigour, of say, sociology. This book is impressionistic, not in the sense that it lacks evidence, but in that its choice of material and subject matter heavily reflects the author's personal experience and liberal preferences.

Second, the value of a piece of analysis or theory from *within* an antagonistic movement is its grasp of the nature of the movement in *practical* terms: why certain activities are carried out, how the movement might succeed in its practical aims, etc. McKay's book certainly takes sides (against the police and government, albeit from a civil rights perspective), but too often he analyses the nature of the movement(s) in terms of *ideas* and *symbols* rather than practices.

The sections on the free festivals and fairs of the 1970s are written by McKay in his role as someone who took part. For those of us who don't know much about these scenes, McKay's account presents itself as a detailed and useful history, indicating some of the conflicts among those involved as well as their run-ins with the cops etc. However, given what McKay has written about movements that we *do* have some knowledge of, it might be best to treat this early history with some caution.

Thus in the chapters on the anti-roads and CJB movement, McKay appears very much as someone looking in from the outside and relying on secondary sources. His



references to features of the No M11 Campaign, in particular, arc strewn with minor unnecessary errors of the sort we expect from journalists. For example, to refer to the 'ancient chestnut tree of Wanstonia' (p. 150) is an anachronism; the 'independent free area of Wanstonia' only came into being around a month after the felling of the Wanstead chestnut tree.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the first collective action against the Criminal Justice Act was on the M11 link road (November 3rd 1994) not the M25 (p. 169). McKay is only saved from making still worse mistakes by the benevolent intervention of some of those involved in *SchNews* (the anti-CJA newsletter) who checked some of his early drafts.

In the chapters on the anti-roads and CJB/A movements, the book draws upon some of the analysis presented previously in *Aufheben*<sup>2</sup> but also badly misrepresents some of our arguments, as well as those of *Counter Information*, in order to position McKay as supporting 'diversity' and us as narrow-minded and sectarian. For example, in our commentary on the Brighton 'Justice?' courthouse squat of 1994, we argued that the different uses to which those involved wanted to put the building (e.g., discussion groups on squatting, art displays, drumming workshops) meant that the squat was neither a centre for a 'community of struggle' nor a community arts centre as such; it fell between stools. However, although demands were often contradictory and competed with each other for space, they did express the participants' various needs. This was unlike the attempt by the fluffier elements involved to deny their own needs by subordinating them to media representationalism. For example, their own desires for sensual pleasure took second place to appeasing the media through a public anti-drugs policy. Worse still, in order to portray a certain image of themselves and their struggle, they argued (unsuccessfully) that the courthouse squat should be abandoned without any resistance; in other words, they were even prepared to give up their own 'community arts space' for the sake of a media representation of themselves! McKay simply characterizes our criticism as *Aufheben* regarding 'poetry' as not 'hardline' enough.

McKay is perhaps right to observe that those involved in the present movement(s) could benefit from being more aware of previous struggles. But in what sense do they share a 'heritage', as McKay suggests? What is the nature of their common resistance? For McKay, what these movements share are 'themes'. Thus, what renders the free party movement political rather than merely hedonistic, he argues, is its reproduction of counter-cultural features of the 1960s - the free festival 'ethos', for example. In the book, this essentially cultural approach to struggles reaches its nadir in the chapter on anarcho-punk. The chapter is solely taken up with the band Crass rather than with the movement itself and is particularly concerned with analysing the meanings in the band's textual productions.

A telling example of the clash between McKay's analysis of 'meanings' and the perspective of the participants he writes about is relegated to a footnote in the anti-roads chapter. McKay interprets the tunnels, tree-houses and benders constructed on the anti-A30 camps between Honiton and Exeter as 'a politicized retreat into the pleasure sites of childhood' (p. 156). The Road Alert! bods rebuked him,

arguing that these constructions were rather 'innovative, low-tech, good defensive tactics, cheap and easy to build with readily available materials, low-impact, movable, and don't leave marks' (p. 202).

Similarly, McKay emphasizes some participants' comments on the symbolic features of the Claremont Road scaffold tower ('a critical parody of the Canary Wharf tower, an update of Tatlin's unbuilt monument to the Russian Revolution...'), adding almost as an afterthought that it functioned as an effective obstruction to bailiffs. Though he lauds the artwork of Claremont Road, McKay does not mention that the *Aufheben* article he quotes from so extensively<sup>3</sup> highlights the tension in Claremont Road between art and barricading. This was not a conflict over the importance of aesthetics and symbols *per se*, but an eminently practical matter. It was a struggle over which strategy would be most effective in the overall anti-roads argument - whether exposing the brutality of the state or physically hindering the state would contribute most in the anti-roads war. The perspective taken in this book, then, tends to get things precisely backwards: symbols appear more important than the social relations that bear them.

McKay wants his book to be seen as a part of the movement(s) he describes, but its approach is quite alien to them. Essentially it renders the movements as fodder for the cultural studies industry. From the perspective of those of us who have been participating in the contemporary movement(s), through its commitment to the cultural studies approach, *Senseless Acts of Beauty* is not only weak as a history but blinkered in its analysis. Although the book is supposedly a history of struggles, McKay fails to develop the obvious point that otherwise 'escapist' or pleasure-seeking movements become 'politicized' because of their (often unexpected) antagonistic relations with the forces of the state: in the struggles, they are forced to defend themselves, and to see the incompatibility between their initially limited desires for 'freedom' and the incessant demands for conformity and compromise from capital and the state. The themes and cultural expressions that particular struggles share with others emerge because of their parallel practical relations with their class enemy in the form of the cops.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 'Auto-Struggles' in *Aufheben* 3.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Kill or Chill' in *Aufheben* 4.

<sup>3</sup> This article, 'The politics of anti-roads protest', appears in the M11 fanzine *The End of the Beginning: Claremont Road* (Clare Zine, PO Box HP 171, Leeds. LS6 1XX).



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### Aufheben

(past tense: *hab auf*; p.p. *aufgehoben*; noun: *Aufhebung*)

*Aufheben* has no English equivalent. In popular German it normally has two main meanings which are in opposition. One is negative: 'to abolish', 'to annul', 'to cancel' etc. The other is positive: 'to supersede', 'to transcend'. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning and used the word to describe the positive-negative action whereby a higher form of thought or nature supersedes a lower form, while at the same time 'preserving' its 'moments of truth'. The proletariat's revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this positive-negative movement of supersession, as is its theoretical realization in Marx's method of critique.

*Aufheben*